CORONET

# JACK VANCE

## Big Planet

WINNER OF THE HUGO AND NEBULA AWARDS

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# BIG PLANET

'Is Earth more beautiful than Big Planet?'

'That's a hard question to answer. Offhand – no. Big Planet is – big. Impressive. The Himalayas on Earth are foothills beside the Sklaemon Range or the Blackstone Cordillera.'

'Where are those mountain ranges?'

'The Sklaemons are about thirty thousand miles northwest, in a part of Big Planet called Matador. The Blackstone Cordillera is to the south-east.'

'There's so much to be learned . . . So many places to see . . . ' Nancy's voice broke a trifle. 'The Earthmen know more about us than we know ourselves. It isn't fair. You keep us in mental shackles . . . '

Glystra laughed sourly. 'Big Planet is a compromise of many people's ideas. Nobody thinks it's right.'

'We grow up barbarians,' she said passionately. 'My father – '

Glystra looked at her quizzically. 'A barbarian is not aware that he is a barbarian.'

' – was murdered. Everywhere is murder and death . . . '

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# Big Planet

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## Jack Vance

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## I. *SABOTAGE*

Arthur Hidders, he called himself. He wore Earth-style clothes, and, except for the length of his hair and his mustache rings, he looked the complete Earthman. He stood an easy five foot six; he was light, with delicate features centered rather too closely in a large round head.

Turning away from the porthole out on space, he fixed old Eli Pianza with a gaze of almost childlike ingenuousness. "That's all very interesting—but doesn't it seem, well, futile?"

"Futile?" Pianza said with great dignity. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

Hidders made a careless gesture. "Earth-Central has sent commissions to Big Planet once a generation for the last five hundred years. Sometimes the commission returns alive, but more often not. In either case, nothing is accomplished. A few investigators lose their lives, much money is spent, Big Planet tempers—forgive me—are ruffled, and things go on as before."

Pianza answered gravely. "What you say is true, but this time perhaps events will turn out differently."

Hidders raised his eyebrows, spread out his hands. "Has Big Planet changed? Has Earth-Central changed?"

Pianza looked uneasily around the lounge—empty except for a Sister of Succor who sat statue-quiet, the visible section of her thin white face rapt in meditation.

"Conditions are different," he admitted. "A great deal different. The former commissions were sent out—to, well, let us say, to soothe Earth consciences. We knew there was murder, torture, terror on Big Planet; we knew something had to be done." He smiled sadly. "Now there's something new on Big Planet: the Bajarnum of Beaujolais."

"Yes, yes—I've frequently traveled through his realms."

"Well, on Big Planet there are probably hundreds of

rulers no less cruel, arrogant, arbitrary—but the Bajarnum, as you certainly must be aware, is expanding his empire, his range of activities, and not only on Big Planet."

"Ah," said Hidders. "So you come to investigate Charley Lysidder."

"Yes, you might say so. And this time we have the authority to act."

A dark-skinned man of medium height came into the lounge. His muscles lay close under his skin; he moved quickly, with sharp, definite motions. This was Claude Glystra, Executive Chairman of the commission.

Glystra looked swiftly around the lounge with ice-colored glances, hard, searching, just short of suspicious. He joined Hidders and Pianza at the porthole, pointed to a flaming yellow sun close ahead. "There's Phaedra. We'll be on Big Planet in a few hours."

A gong rang. "Lunch," said Pianza, rising with a feeling of relief. Glystra led the way from the saloon, pausing at the door to let the Sister of Succor sweep ahead in a billow of black.

"Peculiar creature," muttered Pianza.

Glystra laughed. "There's no one on Big Planet but peculiar people; that's why they're there. If she wants to convert them, or just engage in her own private peculiarity, that's her privilege. And except for the way she dresses, I'd list her peculiarity as a credit to any planet."

Hidders nodded with lively emphasis. The Sisters of Succor, like old-time Sisters of Mercy, had a deservedly high reputation on all the civilized worlds. "Perfect democracy on Big Planet, eh, Mr. Glystra?"

Pianza watched expectantly; Glystra was nothing if not outspoken. Claude Glystra did not fail him.

"Perfect anarchy, Mr. Hidders."

In silence they descended the spiral to the dining saloon, took their places. One by one, the other members of the commission entered. First was Roger Fayne, big, booming,

florid; then Moss Ketch, dark, drawn and saturnine, like the "Before" in a tonic advertisement. Next came Steve Bishop, the youngest man on the commission, sheep-faced and seal-smooth, with a brain full of erudition and a tendency toward hypochondria. He satisfied the one with a portable microfilm library, the other with a portable medicine chest. Behind him, and last, was Bruce Darrot, erect and military, with carrot-colored hair. His lips were compressed as if against an imminent outburst of temper.

The meal was placid, but overhung with tension, which persisted and grew stronger all afternoon, as the bulk of Big Planet spread across the field of vision.

There was a shock, a lurch, a perceptible change of direction. Glystra spun away from the window. The lights flickered, died, then glowed weakly. Glystra ran up the spiral toward the bridge. At the top landing stood a squat man in ship's uniform—Abbigens, the radio operator and purser.

"What's the trouble?" Glystra demanded sharply. "What's going on?"

"Don't know, Mr. Glystra. I tried to get in myself; I found the door locked."

"The ship feels out of control, as if we're going to crash!"

"Don't worry your head about that, Mr. Glystra. We've got emergency landing gear to set us down—automatic stuff. There may be a bit of a thump, but if we sit quiet in the saloon, we're safe enough."

Gently he took Glystra's arm Glystra shook him off and returned to the door; solid as a section of the wall.

He ran back down the steps, railing at himself for not taking precautions against just such a chance. To land anywhere on Big Planet except Earth Enclave meant tragedy, debacle, cataclysm. He stood in the saloon doorway; there was a babble of voices, white faces turned to him. Fayne, Darrot, Pianza, Bishop, Ketch, Hidders and the Sister—all were there. He ran to the engine room; the door opened

under his hands. Asa Elton the easygoing chief engineer, pushed him back.

"We've got to get to the lifeboats," barked Glystra.

"No more lifeboats."

"*No more lifeboats!* What's happened to them?"

"They've been ejected. It's stick by the ship, there's nothing else to do."

"But the captain, the mate—"

"They don't answer the telephone."

"But what has happened?"

Elston's reply was drowned by a siren which filled the air, already made mad by the flickering light, with clangor.

Abbigens came into the saloon. He looked around with an air of triumph, and nodded toward someone. Who? Glystra twisted his head. Too late; he could see only faces, open mouths. And now—a picture he would never forget: the door swung open; the mate staggered in, his hand held as if he were rubbing his throat. He pointed a terrible, trembling finger at Abbigens. Blood rasped in his lungs; his knees folded and he fell to the deck.

Glystra stared at the squat man with the blond hair.

Dark shadows rushed up past the saloon ports. A monstrous splintering instant: the floor of the saloon struck up.

Claude Glystra rose toward consciousness like a water-logged timber. He opened his eyes; vision reached his brain.

He lay on a low bed at the rear of a plank-walled cottage. With a feverish movement he propped himself on an elbow, stared out the open door; and it seemed that he was seeing the most wonderful sight of his life.

He looked out on a green slope, spangled with yellow and red flowers, which rose to a forest. The gables of a village showed through the foliage—quaint gables of carved dark-brown timber. The entire landscape was drenched in a tingling golden-white radiance; every color shone with jewel-like clarity.

Three girls in peasant dress moved across the field of his vision; they were dancing a merry jig. Glystra could hear music—the drone of a concertina, tinkle of mandolin and guitar.

The thud of footsteps roused him. Watching under half-cracked eyelids, he saw Pianza and Roger Fayne enter the cottage: the one tidy, gray, quiet; the other puffing, red-faced, effusive. Behind them came a fresh-faced girl with blonde pigtails; she was carrying a tray.

Glystra struggled up on his elbows again and Pianza said soothingly, "Relax, Claude. You're a sick man."

Glystra demanded, "Was anyone killed?"

"The stewards. They had gone to hide in the shell. And the Sister, too. Apparently she went into her cabin just before the crash. It's twenty feet underground now. Of course the captain and the mate both had their throats cut."

Glystra closed his eyes. "How long has it been?"

"About four days."

"What's been happening?"

"The ship's a total loss," said Fayne. He pulled out a chair and seated himself. "Broken in three pieces. A wonder any of us came out alive."

The girl laid the tray on the bed, knelt, and prepared to feed Glystra. He looked up ruefully. "Is this what's been going on?"

"You had to be taken care of," said Pianza. He patted the girl's head. "This is Natiben-Thulssa, Nancy for short. She's an excellent nurse."

Fayne winked slyly. "Lucky dog."

Glystra moved back from the spoon. "I can feed myself." He looked up at Pianza. "Where are we, Eh?"

Pianza frowned slightly. "The village of Jubilith somewhere near the northeastern tip of Beaujolais."

Glystra pressed his lips together. "It could hardly be worse. I'm astonished we haven't been taken up already."

Pianza looked out the door. "We're rather isolated, and

of course there are no communications . . . We've been nervous, I'll admit."

The scene in the saloon rose before Glystra's mind. "Where's Abbigens?"

"Abbigens? Disappeared."

Glystra groaned under his breath. Pianza looked uneasily at Fayne.

"Why didn't you kill him?"

All Pianza could do was shake his head. Fayne said, "He got away."

"There was someone else, too," said Glystra weakly.

Eli Pianza leaned forward, his eyes sharp and gray. "Someone else? Who?"

"I don't know. Abbigens slaughtered the captain and the mate. The other sabotaged the motors and discharged the lifeboats." He heaved restlessly on the couch and the girl put a cool hand on his forehead. "I've been unconscious four days. Extraordinary."

"You've been under sedatives," said Pianza, "to keep you resting. For a while you were out of your head."

## II. *FORTY-THOUSAND-MILE TREK*

Glystra sat up, against Nancy's restraining hand, and felt the base of his skull. He tried to rise to his feet. Fayne jumped up. "For Heaven's sake, Claude, take it easy!"

Glystra shook his head. "We've got to get out of here. Fast. Think. Where's Abbigens? He's gone to report to Charley Lysidder, the Bajarnum." He went to the door and stood in the wash of golden-white sunlight, the Big Planet panorama before him. Pianza brought a chair; Glystra sank into it.

The cottage, the forest, the village were situated halfway up the face of a slope, vast beyond Earthly conception. Above, Glystra could see no sharp termination or ridge; the land melted into pale blue distance.

Fayne stretched his heavy arms out into the warmth. "Here's where I'm coming in my old age. We never should have wasted Big Planet on the freaks."

Nancy slipped into the house with a stiff back.

Roger Fayne chuckled. "I guess she thought I was calling *her* a freak."

"You'll never have an old age, Roger," said Glystra, "if we don't clear out of here. Where's the ship?"

"Up in the forest a little bit."

"How far are we from Beaujolais?"

Fayne looked southwest diagonally up the slope. "The borders of Beaujolais are vague. Over the top of the slope is a deep valley, apparently volcanic. Full of hot springs, fumaroles, geysers, so they tell me the valley of the Glass-Blowers. Last year the Bajarnum moved in with his troops, and now the valley is part of Beaujolais. To date, he hasn't sent officials or tax collectors to Jubilith, but they're expected every day, together with a garrison."

"Why a garrison? To keep order?"

Fayne gestured down the slope. "Protection against the slaver nomads—gypsies, they call 'em."

Glystra looked up at the village. "They don't seem to have suffered too much . . . How far is Grosgarth?"

"As near as I can make it, two hundred miles south. There's a garrison town—Montmarchy, they call it—about fifty miles southeast along the slope."

"Fifty miles." Glystra considered. "That's probably where Abbigens headed for. . . ." A heavy, metallic crash sounded from the forest. Glystra looked questioningly at Pianza.

"They're cutting up the ship. It's the most metal they've seen in their whole lives. We've made them all millionaires."

"Until the Bajarnum confiscates the whole thing," said Fayne.

"We've got to get out," Glystra muttered, twisting in his chair. "We've got to get to the Enclave—somehow. . . ."

Pianza pursed his lips. "It's around the planet, forty thousand miles."

Glystra struggled up to his feet. "We've got to get out of here. We're sitting ducks, Eli. If we're caught, Lysidder will make an example of us. . . . Where's the rest of the ship's company?"

Pianza nodded toward the village. "We've been given a big house. Hidders has gone."

"Gone? Where to?"

"Grosgarth. He says he'll take a barge to Marwan Gulf and join one of the beach caravans to Wale."

"Hmmm. The stewards dead, the captain and mate dead, the Sister dead, Abbigens gone, Hidders gone"—Glystra counted on his finger "that leaves eight; the commission and two engine-room officers. You'd better bring them all down here, and we'll have a council of war."

Eyes troubled, Glystra watched Pianza and Fayne climbing to the village, then turned his attention down the slope. Beaujolais soldiers approaching during the daylight would be visible for many miles. Glystra gave thanks for the non-metallic crust of Big Planet. No metal meant no machinery; no machinery meant no electricity—therefore, no long-distance communication.

Nancy appeared from the cottage; she had changed her puffed blue skirt for a coverall, a harlequin suit of red and orange motley. Over her hair she wore a close-fitting cap.

Claude Glystra stared a moment. Nancy whirled before him, pirouetted on one toe, with the other leg bent at the knee. "Are all the girls at Jubilith as lovely as you are?"

She smiled and tilted her face to the sun. "I'm not from Jubilith . . . I'm an outlander."

"So? From where?"

She gestured to the north. "From Veillevaux Forest. My father had the gift of prophecy, and for many miles people came to ask the future.

"My father grew rich," continued Nancy. "He trained me

in the crafts. I traveled to Grosgarth and Calliope and Wale, and through the Stemvelt Canals I went outland as a troubadour, with fine companies, and we saw many towns and castles and beautiful sights." She shuddered. "And evil, also. Much evil, at Glaythree . . ." Tears welled into her eyes. She said forlornly, "When I returned to Veillevaux Forest, I found ruin and desolation. The gypsies from North Heath had raided the village and burned the house of my father with all my family inside. And I wandered here to Jubilith to learn to dance, that I might dance away my grief. . . ."

Glystra studied her closely. She had a marvelous mobility of feature—sparkle of eye, lilt of voice when she spoke of joy—a mouth that was never quite in repose. And when she dwelt on her grief her eyes became large and wistful.

"And how is it that you were selected to nurse me?"

She shrugged. "I'm an outlander; I know the methods of Grosgarth some of which have been learned from Earth books. *Naisuka.*"

Glystra looked up in puzzlement, repeated the word. "What is that?"

"It's a Beaujolais word. It means—well, it's what makes a person decide to do things for no reason whatever."

He pointed down the slope. "What country is that nestled down there?"

She turned, propped herself on one elbow. "The Jubilith claiming ends at the Tsalombar Woods." She indicated a far line of forest. "The Tree-people live there, above the tritchsod."

Another idiom unfamiliar to Glystra.

Up by the village, the Earthmen appeared. Claude Glystra watched their approach. Guilt in any one of them seemed as remote as guilt in Nancy; but someone had helped Albigens, and someone had burned out the motors. Of course it might have been Arthur Hidders, and he was gone.

"Sit down," said Glystra. They took seats on the turf. Glystra hesitated, then turned back to the men. "We're in a

tough spot, although I suppose I don't need to belabor the point."

No one spoke.

"We're shipwrecked, with no possibility of getting help from Earth. As far as technical superiority goes, we're no better off than the people of the village. Maybe worse. They understand their tools, their materials; we don't. If we had unlimited time, we might be able to patch up some kind of radio and call the Enclave. We don't have that time. Any minute, we can expect soldiers to take us to Grosgarth. . . . We've got one chance only—that is to get out of Beaujolais, put miles behind us."

He paused and looked from face to face. Pianza was mild, noncommittal; Fayne's big forehead was creased in a heavy frown; Ketch was petulantly digging at the ground with a bit of sharp gravel. Bishop's face was faintly troubled, with little puckers like inverted V's over his eyes. Darrot ran a hand through his sparse red hair, and muttered something to Ketch, who nodded. Elton, the chief engineer, sat quietly, as if unconcerned.

Vallusser, the second engineer, glared, as if Glystra were the cause of his difficulties. He said in a thick voice. "What happens when we escape? Where do we escape to? There's nothing out there"—he waved his hand down the slope—"but wild men. They'll kill us. Some of them are slavers, but that's little improvement."

Glystra shrugged. "You're free to do whatever you like, save your skin the best way you can. Personally, I see one way out. It's hard, it's long, it's dangerous. Maybe it's impossible. It's close to certain that not all of us will make it. But we want to escape with our lives; we want to go home. That means"—he accented his words heavily—"one place on Big Planet. The Enclave. We've got to get to the Enclave."

"Sounds good," said Fayne. "I'm all for it. How do we do it?"

Glystra grinned. "The only means of locomotion we've got —our feet."

"Feet?" Fayne's voice rose.

"Sounds like a pretty stiff hike," said Darrot.

Glystra shrugged. "There's no use fooling ourselves. We've got only one chance to get back to Earth—that's to make Earth Enclave."

"But *forty thousand miles?*" Fayne protested plaintively. "I'm a big man, hard on my feet."

"We'll pick up pack animals," said Glystra. "Buy them, steal them—we'll get them somehow."

"But forty thousand miles."

Glystra nodded. "It's a long way. But if we find the right kind of river, we'll float. Or maybe we can angle down to the Black Ocean, find a ship, and sail around the coast."

"Can't be done," said Bishop. "The Australian Peninsula reaches down and curves back east. We'd have to wait till we reached Hendelland, then cut down, around the Blackstone Cordillera, to the Parmarbo. And, according to the Big Planet Almanac, the Parmarbo is virtually unnavigable due to reefs, pirates, carnivorous sea anemones and weekly hurricanes."

Roger Fayne groaned again. Glystra heard a sound from Nancy; looking down, he saw her mouth quivering in efforts to restrain a giggle. He rose to his feet, and Pianza watched him doubtfully. "How do you feel, Claude?"

"I'm weak. But tomorrow I'll be as good as new. Nothing wrong with me a little exercise won't cure. One thing we can be thankful for—"

"What's that?" asked Fayne.

Glystra motioned to his feet. "Good boots. Waterproof, wearproof. We'll need them."

Fayne inspected his torso. "I suppose the paunch will work off."

Glystra glanced around the circle. "Any other ideas? You, Vallusser?"

"I'll stay with the crowd."

"Good. Now here's the program. We've got to make up packs. We want all the metal we can conveniently carry; it's precious on Big Planet. Each of us ought to be able to manage fifteen pounds Tools and knives would be best, but I suppose we'll have to take what we can salvage . . . Then we'll want clothes, a change apiece. Ship's chart of Big Planet, if available. A compass. Everyone had better find himself a good knife, a blanket, and most important—hand weapons. Has anyone checked the ship?"

Elton put his hand in his blouse and displayed the black barrel of an ion-discharge pistol. "This belonged to the captain. I helped myself."

"I've got my two," said Fayne.

"There should be one in my cabin aboard ship," said Pianza. "There was no way in yesterday, but maybe I can squeeze in somehow."

"There's another in mine," said Glystra.

The seven men filed uphill, into the forest of silky blue-green trees. Glystra watched them from the doorway.

Nancy rose to her feet. "Best now that you should sleep."

He went inside, lowered himself to the cot. Nancy stood looking down at him. "Claude Glystra."

"What?"

"May I come with you?"

He turned his head and stared up in astonishment. "Come where?"

"Wherever you're going."

"Around the planet?"

"Yes."

He shook his head decisively. "You'd be killed, with the rest of us. This is a thousand to one chance."

"I don't care . . . I die only once. And I'd like to see Earth. I've wandered far, and I know many things . . ."

Claude Glystra put the spur to his brain. It was tired

and failed to reach. Something was out of place. He searched her face; was it infatuation? She colored.

"You blush easily," Glystra observed.

"I'm strong. I can do as much work as either Ketch or Bishop."

"A pretty girl can cause trouble."

She shrugged. "There are women everywhere on Big Planet."

Glystra sank back on the couch, shaking his head. "You can't come with us, Nancy."

She bent over. "Tell them I'm a guide. Can't I come as far as the forest?"

"Very well. As far as the forest."

## III. *FREE FOR ALL*

Glystra slept an hour, two hours, soaking the rest into his bones. When he awoke, afternoon sunlight was slanting in through the doorway, a flood of richest saffron. Up the slope, the village merry-making was in full swing. Lines of girls and young men, in parti-colored motley like Nancy's, capered back and forth in lighthearted buffoonery. To Claude Glystra's ears came a shrill jig played on fiddles, concertinas, guitars, rhapsodiums. Back and forth, across his vision, ran the dancers, bounding in a kind of prancing goose step.

Pianza and Darrot looked in through the doorway. "Awake, Claude?" asked Pianza.

Glystra swung his feet over the edge of the cot and sat up. "Good as new." He stood up, stretched, and patted the back of his head; the soreness had nearly disappeared. "Everything ready?"

Pianza nodded, "Ready to go. We found your ion-shine, also a heat-gun belonging to the mate." He looked at Glystra half-sidewise. "I understand that Nancy has been included in the expedition."

"No," said Glystra. "I told her she might come as far as the forest—that's only two or three hours away."

Eli Pianza looked doubtful. "She's made herself up a pack. Says she's going with us."

Darrot gave his head a terse shake. "I don't like it, Claude. This march is no place for a girl. Bound to be friction, inconvenience."

Glystra said, "I'm in full agreement with you, Bruce. I refused her point-blank."

"But she's all packed," said Pianza.

"If she follows a hundred yards to the rear, I don't see how we can stop her -short of physical constraint."

Pianza blinked. "Well, naturally . . ." His voice trailed off.

Darrot was unconvinced. "She's traveled widely; she's been to Grosgarth. Suppose she's one of the Bajarnum's secret agents? I understand they're everywhere—even on the other side of the planet; even on Earth."

"It's possible. For all I know, you work for the Bajarnum yourself. Someone does."

Darrot snorted, and turned away.

"Don't worry," said Glystra, slapping him on the shoulder. "When we get to the forest, we'll send her back." He went to the door and stepped outside.

Pianza said, "Bishop salvaged the ship's first-aid kit, and all his food pills and vitamins. They may be useful; our food won't always be the best."

"Good."

"Fayne found his camping equipment, and we're taking along the stove and the water-maker."

"Any spare power units for the ion-shines?"

"No."

Glystra chewed his lip. "That's bad . . . Find the Sister's body?"

Pianza shook his head.

"Too bad," said Glystra, although he felt little real re-

morse. The woman had hardly existed as a human being: he had been conscious of a thin white face, a black robe, a black headress, and an air of intensity; now, all was gone.

Down from the village came the Earthmen, and around them circled the dancers, gay, exalted, aware only of their own motion and color. Ketch, Elton, Vallusser, Fayne, Bishop —and Nancy. She stood a little apart, watching the dancing with an air of serene detachment, as if she had renounced whatever ties bound her to Jubilith.

Glystra looked out over Big Planet, already flooded in light of a darker gold. Behind him were the dancers in groups of five, wheeling, kicking out their legs at the knee, wagging their heads drolly, and the music waxed shrill and happy. Looking down the vast slope, Glystra suddenly felt weak before the immensity of the journey ahead. Jubilith seemed warm and secure, almost like home. Ahead was only -distance. Sectors and sections, extents and expanses. *Forty thousand miles*, he thought; *around the Earth, and halfway around again . . .*

Looking to where Earth's horizon would lie, he could lift his eyes and see lands reaching far on out: pencil lines of various subtle colors, each line a plain or a forest, a sea, a desert, a mountain range . . . He took a step forward, looked over his shoulder. "Let's go."

For a long time, the merry music followed their backs; only when the sun passed behind the slope, and mauve dusk came down from the sky, did the sounds dwindle to the silence of distance.

The way led across the bracken, a thick resilient mat of gray stalks beaded with dull green nodules. The slope was gentle and uniform, and the coming of Big Planet night brought no difficulties; it was only necessary to walk down the fall of the ground.

Fayne and Darrot strode together at the head of the group; then came Glystra, with Nancy at one elbow and Pianza at the other. To their left walked Ketch, a little

apart; and behind came Bishop, eyes on the ground. At the rear, twenty paces behind, walked Elton, striding easily, and Vallusser, picking his way as if his feet hurt.

Twilight waned and stars appeared. Now there was nothing in the world but darkness, the sky, the planet, and their own infinitesimal persons.

Nancy had been carefully quiet, but now in the dark, she pressed closer to Glystra. She spoke in a soft, low voice. "Tell me, which of those stars is Old Sun?"

Glystra scanned the heavens. The constellations were strange, and made no particular pattern.

He remembered that on leaving Earth for Big Planet, Cetus was astern till they arrived at Index . . . There was Spica, and nearby the black bulge of the Porridge Pot. "I think that's the Sun there—right above the bright white star, in toward that big blot of fog."

She stared wide-eyed into the sky. "Tell me about Earth."

"It's home," said Glystra. He looked for several seconds up at the white star. "I'd like to be there . . ."

"Is Earth more beautiful than Big Planet?"

"That's a hard question to answer. Offhand—no. Big Planet is big. Impressive. The Himalayas on Earth are foothills beside the Sklaemon Range here, or the Blackstone Cordillera."

"Where are they?" Nancy asked.

Glystra's mind had been wandering. "Where are what?"

"Those mountain ranges."

"The Sklaemons are about thirty thousand miles northwest, in a part of Big Planet called Matador. The Ski-men live there, I believe. The Blackstone Cordillera is to the southeast, about five thousand miles, above the Australian Peninsula, in Henderland."

"There's so much to be learned . . . So many places to see . . ." Her voice broke a trifle. "The Earthmen know more about us than we know ourselves. It isn't fair."

Glystra laughed sourly. "Big Planet is a compromise of many people's ideas Nobody thinks it's right."

"We grow up barbarians," she said passionately. "My father—"

Glystra looked at her quizzically. "A barbarian is not aware that he is a barbarian."

"—was murdered. Everywhere is murder and death. . . ."

Glystra tried to hold his voice at a dispassionate level. "It's not your fault that this is so—but it's not the fault of the Earth people, either. We've never attempted to exercise authority past Virginis Reef. Anyone passing through is on his own—and his children pay the price."

Nancy shook her head -a kind of personal little jerk with head cocked sidewise, indicating incomplete conviction.

Glystra tried to think. He detested human pain and misery as wholeheartedly as she did. He was equally convinced that Earth could maintain authority only through a finite volume of space. It was likewise impossible to prevent people who so desired to pass the boundaries and declare themselves free of supervision. He also admitted that in such a case, many might suffer from the mistakes of a few.

Nancy had known injustice—the murder, the grief, the anger, the aberrations which, reinforcing and building up through the generations, now infected tribes, peoples, races, continents, the entire world. These immediacies would be in the forefront of her mind; his problem was to convey a sense of more-and-less relationships to endow these vaguenesses and conditionals with enough power to counter the force of her emotion.

"On Earth, Nancy, ever since our first archaic histories, the race has graduated into levels. Some people have lived in complete harmony with their times, others have in their core a nonconformist independence—an apparently built-in trait, a basic emotion like hunger, fear, affection. These people are unhappy and insecure in a rigid society; through all the ages they have been the unclassifiables. They have been the

pioneers, explorers, flagpole-sitters; the philosophers, the criminals, the prophets of doom, and the progenitors of new cultural complexes."

They walked on through the dark. The matted bracken crackled underfoot, and muffled voices sounded ahead and behind them.

Nancy, still watching Old Sun, said, "But these people have nothing to do with Big Planet."

"Jubilith," said Glystra, "was founded by a ballet troupe who apparently desired solitude and peace to perfect their art. Perhaps they only intended to come out for a year or two, but they stayed. The first settlers, almost six hundred years ago, were primitivists—people who dislike machinery, except for simple things like wagons. Primitivism isn't forbidden on Earth, but they were treated like freaks. So they bought a ship and went exploring past the edge of the System. They found Big Planet. At first they thought it too big to be habitable—"

"Why should that be?"

"Gravity," said Glystra. "The larger a planet is, the stronger the pull of its gravity. But Big Planet is made of light materials with a specific gravity only a third of Earth's. Earth is a very dense planet, with abundant metals and heavy elements, so the gravity works out about the same although there's thirty times the volume here . . . The primitivists liked Big Planet. It was paradise—sunny, bright, with a mild climate, and most essential it had an organic complex similar to that of Earth. In other words, Big Planet proteins were not incompatible with Earth protoplasm. They could eat plants and animals here. They settled here, and sent back to Earth for their friends.

"There was room for other minorities—endless room. Out they migrated—all the cults, misanthropic societies, and just people in general. Sometimes they built towns, sometimes they lived by themselves—a thousand, two thousand, five thousand miles from their nearest neighbor. Useful ore

deposits are nonexistent on Big Planet; technical civilization never had a chance to get started, and Earth refused to allow the export of modern weapons to Big Planet. So Big Planet evolved into a clutter of tiny states and cities, with stretches of open country in between."

Nancy started to speak, but Glystra anticipated her. "Yes, we might have organized Big Planet and given it System law. But—in the first place—it is beyond the established boundaries of the System. Secondly, we would thereby have been defeating the purpose of those people who sacrificed their place on the civilized worlds for independence—a perfectly legitimate aim in itself. Thirdly, we would be denying refuge to other restless souls, with the effect of sending them out seeking other worlds, almost inevitably less propitious. So we let Big Planet become the System's Miscellaneous File. We established Earth Enclave, with the university and trade school, for those who wish to return to Earth. But very few apply."

"Of course not," said Nancy scornfully. "It's a place of maniacs."

"Why do you say that?"

"It is well known. Once a Bajarnum of Beaujolais went to the Enclave. He attended the school, and he came back a different man. He freed all the slaves, and stopped all the punishment ordeals. When he declared the land-hold system void, the College of Dukes rose up and killed him, because clearly he was mad."

Claude Glystra smiled wanly. "He was the sanest man on the planet. . . ."

She sniffed.

"Yes," said Glystra. "Very few apply to the Enclave. Big Planet is home. It's free-open—limitless. A man can find any kind of life he wants, although he may be killed almost any minute. On Earth, and the other planets of the System, we have a rigid society with precise conventions. It's smooth and easy now; most of the misfits have gone to Big Planet."

"Dull," said Nancy. "Stupid and dull."

"Not entirely," said Glystra. "After all, there are five billion people on Earth, and no two of them are identical."

Nancy was silent a moment, then, almost as a taunt: "What of the Bajarnum of Beaujolais? He plans to conquer the planet. He's already expanded Beaujolais threefold."

Glystra looked straight ahead, down through the infinite Big Planet night. "If the Bajarnum of Beaujolais, or the Nomarch of Skene, or the Gaypride Baron, or the Nine Wizards, or anyone else dominates Big Planet, then the inhabitants of Big Planet have lost their freedom and flexibility even more certainly than if the System organized a federal government. Because then they would be obliged to adapt their lives to aberrations different from their own, and not merely to a few rules and regulations essentially rational."

She was not convinced. "I'm surprised that the System considered the Bajarnum important enough to worry about."

Glystra smiled thinly. "Just the fact of our being here tells you something about the Bajarnum. He's got spies and agents everywhere including Earth. He regularly violates our number one law—the embargo on weapons and metal to Big Planet."

"A man is killed just as surely with a birkwood sword as with a shaft of light."

Glystra shook his head. "You are considering only one aspect of the subject. Where do these weapons come from? The System prohibits unlicensed manufacture of weapons. It's very difficult to establish a modern factory in secret, and therefore most of the Bajarnum's weapons are stolen or pirated. Ships and depots are ripped open, men killed or herded into slave-bins, bound out for the One-man Kingdoms."

"One-man Kingdoms? What are they?"

"Among these five billion inhabitants of Earth I mentioned a minute ago are some very strange people," said Glystra thoughtfully. "Not all the odd ones have migrated to Big

Planet. We have over-rich over-ripe creatures on Earth, many of whom have found a little world somewhere off in the cluster and set themselves up as monarchs. The pirates sell them slaves and out on their little domains their will is law. After two or three months they return to the System and function as citizens for a period. Then they tire of the cosmopolis, and it's back to their One-man Kingdom, out in the star-stream."

## IV. *EIGHT AGAINST AN ARMY*

NANCY remained silent. "What's that got to do with Charley Lysidder?"

Glystra looked at her sidewise, and she saw his face as a white mask in the darkness. "How does the Bajarnum pay for his smuggled weapons? They're expensive. Lots of blood and pain is spent on every ion-shine."

"I don't know . . . I never thought of it."

"There's no metal on Big Planet, but there's trade-goods more valuable."

Nancy said nothing.

"People."

"Oh . . ."

"Charley Lysidder is like a carrier of the plague, and he infects half the universe."

"But—what can you do? You have only eight men. You have no weapons, no plans, no documents "

"Just brains."

Nancy subsided into a silence of a quality which made Glystra peer at her quizzically. "You're not impressed?"

"I . . . I'm—very inexperienced."

Claude Glystra once more sought her face through the darkness, this time to make sure she was serious. "We form a team. Each man is a specialist. Pianza here"—he nodded to the gray shape at his left—"is an organizer and administrator.

Moss Ketch records our findings on his camera and sonographs. Bruce Darrot is an ecologist—"

"What's that?"

Glystra looked ahead to where Fayne and Darrot walked, and the sound of their footsteps came as a regular double thud-crackle. They were now entering a country clumped with great trees; ahead loomed the Tsalombar Woods, a line of black heavier than the sky. "Ecology," said Glystra, "is ultimately concerned with keeping people fed. Hungry people are angry and dangerous."

In a subdued voice, Nancy said, "The gypsies are always hungry . . . They killed my father. . . ."

"They didn't *kill* him because they were hungry—a dead man is no good to slavers. They were trying to capture him alive. . . .

"Well, to go on, Fayne is our mineralogist. I'm the co-ordinator and propagandist." Anticipating her question, he asked, "Why is the Bajarnum able to conquer his neighbors?"

"Because he has a stronger army . . . He's very crafty."

"Suppose his army no longer obeyed him. Suppose no one paid any attention to his orders. What could he do?"

"Nothing. He'd be powerless."

"Propaganda at its maximum effectiveness accomplishes just that. I work with Bishop. Steve Bishop is a student of culture—human society. He can look at an arrowhead and tell you whether the man who made it took his name from his father or his mother. He can study the background of people and discover their racial aberrations, their push-buttons—the ideas that make them react like herds of"—he was about to say "sheep" but he remembered that Big Planet harbored no sheep—"herds of pechavies."

She looked at him half-smiling. "And you can make people behave like pechavies?"

Glystra shook his head. "Not exactly. Or, I should say, not all the time."

They marched onward down the slope. The trees loomed

in closer and they entered Tsalombar Forest. Around him marched eight dark shapes. He said under his breath to Nancy, "Someone here—I don't know who—is my enemy. Somehow, I've got to learn who he is . . ."

She had stopped breathing. "Are you sure?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Yes."

"What will he do?"

"If I knew, I'd watch for it."

"The Magic Fountain at Myrtlesee could tell you. He knows everything."

Glystra searched his mind. "Where's Myrtlesee?"

She gestured. "Far to the east. I've never been there; it's a dangerous journey unless you ride the monoline, and that costs much metal. My father told me of the oracle at the Fountain. He babbles in a frenzy and answers any questions asked, and then he dies, whereupon the Dongmans select a new oracle."

Ahead of them Fayne and Darrot stopped short. "Quiet!" whispered Darrot. "There's a camp ahead. Fires."

The sighing branches of Tsalombar Forest shut off the sky, and the darkness was nearly complete. Ahead, a tiny spark of red flickered past the tree trunks.

"Would it be the Tree-men?" Glystra asked Nancy.

She said doubtfully, "No . . . They never come down from the trees. And they're deathly afraid of fire . . ."

Glystra said, "Everybody come here, close." Dark shapes stepped forward.

Glystra said in a low, hurried voice, "I'm going ahead to reconnoiter. I want everyone to stay together. This is emphatic No one is to move from this group or make a sound until a return. Nancy, you stand at the center, the rest of you stand with your elbows touching Make sure who is on either side of you, and make sure he doesn't move."

He circled the group. "Everybody touching two others? Good. Count off." The names came softly.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," said Glystra. "If I need help—I'll yell. So keep your ears open."

The matted bracken crackled under his feet as he stole down the slope.

It was a large fire, a roaring blaze fed by logs, in the center of a clearing. Fifty or sixty men sprawled around the fire, completely at their ease. They wore a loose blue uniform of baggy breeches, triced below the knee, and smocks gathered at the waist by a black sash. On their chest they wore a red insignia, a triangle apex-down. They carried knives and catapults in their sash; squat baskets, heavy with darts, hung at their backs.

They were a rough crew—short and stocky, with flat brown faces, little spade beards, narrow-lidded eyes, and hooked noses. They were drinking from black, kidney-shaped leather sacks. Discipline at the moment was lax.

A little apart, his back turned to the noise, stood a man in a black uniform. Glystra saw that it was Abbigens. Abbigens conversed with a man who was evidently the officer-in-charge, apparently instructing him. The officer listened, nodded.

Not far from Glystra, a train of odd-looking beasts waited restlessly, swinging their long necks, snapping at the air, mumbling and moaning. They were narrow-shouldered and high in the back; they had six powerful legs and a narrow untrustworthy-looking head a composite of camel, horse, goat, dog, lizard. The driver had not bothered to remove their packs. With sudden interest, Claude Glystra examined the loads they bore.

One carried three metal cylinders, another a squat barrel and a bundle of metal rods. Glystra recognized the mechanism: a knock-down ion-blast, a fieldpiece which was capable of smashing Jubilith flat. It was of Earth manufacture. Glystra looked behind him, through the trees, suddenly uneasy. It was strange that no sentries had been posted.

A flurry of activity at one side of the clearing caught his

attention. A dozen soldiers stood with craned necks, looking up, pointing, talking excitedly. Glystra followed their gaze. A hundred feet overhead was a village—a network of rude trestles, walkways swung on vines, pendant huts swaying like oriole nests. No light showed, the huts were dark, but over the side of the trestles peered several dozen white faces framed in a tousle of brown hair. They made no sound, moved but little, and then like squirrels, quickly, abruptly. Apparently the Beaujolais soldiers had not previously noticed the village. Glystra peered up again. They had found a girl —whey-faced, bleary eyed, but still a girl.

Glystra eyed the pack animals with interest, estimating the chances of leading them into the forest while attention was diverted by the girl in the tree-village. He decided that the chances were scant.

Where the soldiers were baiting the Tree-men there was further activity. A young swaggerer with a spike mustache was climbing a rude ladder toward the hut from which hung the head of the girl The way was easy; where a branch angled up, steps were cut into the wood. The soldier, spurred by the approving hoots of his comrades, ran up the trunk, paused on a rude platform. Here he was partly veiled by the branches. There was a motion, a swishing sound, a thud, and a sound of disturbed branches. A sprawling, twisting body plunged down from the shadows and landed with a heavy thump.

Glystra jerked back, startled. He looked up; there was no motion from the tree-village. Apparently the soldier had sprung a trap. A poised weight had swept down, struck him from the platform. Now he lay moaning. His fellows stood around him, watching dispassionately. There were glances turned up at the Tree-men, but without apparent hostility.

Abbigens and the officer strode over and stood looking down at the fallen man. He choked back his groans, lay silent, staring up white faced. The officer spoke, Glystra could hear the tone of his voice but could not distinguish the

words. The soldier on the ground made a reply; he tried to rise to his feet, an anguished effort. But his leg lay out at a curious angle; tilting his chin, gritting his teeth, he lay back.

The officer spoke to Abbigens; Abbigens spoke, gesturing up at the tree-village. The officer made a motion to one of the soldiers, turned away.

The soldier looked down at his comrade on the ground, muttered resentfully, then drew his sword from the sheath and stabbed the fallen man.

Behind the tree, Glystra swallowed the lump in his throat.

The officer strode back and forth through the camp, barking orders, and the words were loud enough for Glystra to hear: "Up, up on your feet. Form ranks, double-quick; we've overstayed. Driver, see to your beasts—"

Abbigens came forward, spoke briefly to the officer. The officer nodded, crossed the clearing. Glystra could not hear his orders, but the soldier who was tending the pack animals led aside the two beasts bearing the knock-down ion-blast.

Claude Glystra watched with narrow eyes. Was the ion-blast to be used against the tree-village?

The ion-blast was assembled and mounted on its tripod. Firelight glinted on the smooth metal barrel. The cannoneer swiveled the tube back and forth to test the bearing, rocked it up and down, checking the balance. He threw off the safety, set the valve, pulled the trigger. A line of violet light lanced from the nozzle, power cracked down the lane of ionized air, spattered into the turf.

Testing. The weapon was ready.

The cannoneer set the safety, went to the line of pack animals and selected the strongest beast. He yanked at the straps holding the pack to the animal's back. The driver came forward angrily and the two fell into a dispute.

Glystra moved, hesitated, started up, then fell back. He gathered himself angrily. This was the time for boldness, for

taking a chance. He stepped forward, heart in mouth, moved out into the firelight. He swung the weapon around, opened the nozzle into a narrow gape, and threw off the safety. It was so simple as to be ridiculous.

One of the soldiers uttered a sharp cry, pointed.

"Stand still!" Glystra called out in a loud, clear voice.

## V. *CAPTURE*

AROUND THE clearing, shapes froze; startled faces looked in his direction. Yelling in fury, the cannoneer sprang forward. Claude Glystra pulled the trigger; the fan of violet light spread out, power crackled along the conductive air. The cannoneer was shattered, and with him went five others in the spread of the blaster's fan.

Glystra lifted his voice. "Pianza! Faynel"

None of the soldiers moved. Abbigens stared, his pasty face flat, his eyes like a pair of olives.

There was a rustle of footsteps behind. "Who is it?" asked Glystra.

"Eli Pianza—and the rest of us."

"Good. Get around to the side, where you'll be out of range." He raised his voice. "Now you Beaujolains. Move to the center, this side of the fire . . . *Quick!*"

Glumly the soldiers sidled into the center of the clearing. Abbigens took three quick steps along with them, but Glystra's voice halted him. "Abbigens—put your hands on your head, walk backwards toward me. Quick, now . . ."

Glystra said aside to Pianza, "Get his weapon." He snapped to the officer, who was quietly shifting toward the rear of the cluster of men, "You—come forward, hands on your head." From the corner of his mouth. "One of you—Elton—search him."

Elton stepped forward; Vallusser made as if to follow.

Glystra snapped, "You others stand where you are . . . This is ticklish."

Abbigens carried an ion-shine; the officer had a rocket-pistol.

Glystra said, "Put the guns on the ground and tie 'em up with pack ropes."

Abbigens and the officer lay helpless. The soldiers stood swaying, muttering in the center of the clearing.

"Nancy," called Glystra.

"Yes."

"Do exactly as I say. Pick up those two weapons—by their barrels. Bring them to me. Don't walk between the blaster and the soldiers."

Nancy walked across the clearing to where the weapons glittered on the ground.

*"By the barrel!"* rasped Glystra.

She hesitated, turned him an odd wide-eyed look, the skin below the ridge of her cheekbones tight and pale. Glystra watched her stonily. This was a time to trust no one. She bent, gingerly picked up the guns, brought them to him. He dropped them into his pouch, looking warily into the faces of his companions. Behind one of the faces was furious scheming . . . Behind which face?

Now was a critical moment. Whoever it was would seek to get behind him.

He gestured. I want all of you to stand over there, to the side." He waited till all his companions stood to the side of the clearing. "Now," he said to the soldiers. "One at a time, cross the clearing . . ."

Half an hour later, the soldiers squatted in a tight circle facing inward, a sullen slack-faced group. Abbigens and the officer lay where they had been tied, Abbigens watching Glystra with expressionless eyes. Claude Glystra watched Abbigens also, watched the direction of his glances.

Eli Pianza looked doubtfully across at the clot of pris-

oners. "This poses quite a problem . . . What are you planning to do with them?"

Glystra, standing behind the blaster, relaxed a trifle, stretched. "Well—we can't turn them loose. If we can keep the news of this episode away from the Bajarnum, we gain a big head start." Together they surveyed the prisoners; and above the rumpled blue uniforms, eyes fearfully reflected back the firelight. "It becomes a choice of killing them or taking them with us."

Pianza snapped his head around in alarm. "Take *them* with us?"

"Down the slope a few miles begins the steppe. Nomadland. If there's any fighting to be done, perhaps we can persuade them to do it for us."

"But—we have the blaster. We don't need swords and darts."

"What good is a blaster if we're ambushed? Jumped from two or three sides at once? The blaster is a fine weapon when you can see your target."

"It may be difficult to manage them."

"I've considered that. Through the forest we'll tie them together. Once out on the steppes they can march ahead of the blaster. Naturally, we'll have to be careful."

He set the safety on the blaster, nosed the barrel down into the bracken, then strolled to where Abbigens lay. "Think it's about time to talk?"

Abbigens drew back the corners of his wide mouth. "Sure, I'll talk. What do you want to know?"

Glystra smiled thinly. "Who helped you aboard the *Vittorio?*"

Abbigens looked down the line of faces. "Pianza," he said.

Eli Pianza raised his mild white eyebrows in startled protest. Somewhere else along the line of faces there was a change of expression—a flicker.

Glystra abruptly turned away. At the moment there was only one person he was sure of—himself.

He pointed to Darrot and Elton. "You two man the blaster. Neither of you trust the other. There's an enemy among us. We don't know who he is, and we can't give him the opportunity to destroy us all." He took a step backwards, held his ion-shine ready. "I want to locate the weapons in the crowd. Pianza, you have an ion-shine?"

"Yes. One of Fayne's."

"Turn your back on me, lay it on the ground."

Pianza did so, without remonstrance. Claude Glystra stepped forward, ran his hand over Pianza's body, into his pouch. He found no other weapon.

In a similar fashion, Glystra took the ion-shine from Fayne, the mate's heat-gun from Ketch. Vallusser and Bishop carried only knives. Nancy carried no weapon of any sort.

Tucking the weapons into his pouch, he stepped behind the blaster and took the ion-shine from Elton. That made five ion-shines, counting Abbigens', and the mate's heat-gun.

"Now we're as toothless as possible, and I think we ought to sleep. Ketch, you and Vallusser take a couple of swords and stand on each side of the clearing. Make a triangle with the blaster. Don't get in between the blaster and the soldiers, because if anything happens—you're gone." He turned to Darrot and Elton. "Hear that? Use that blaster if there's even a hint of an excuse."

"Right," said Elton. Darrot nodded.

He looked at Nancy, Pianza, and Bishop. "We'll stand the second watch . . . Right there by the fire is a good place, out of range of the blaster."

The bracken was soft and comfortable under the blanket where the firelight had warmed it. Glystra stretched himself down, and fatigue came rising from his bones and muscles; for an instant he was almost dazed by the pleasant ache of relaxation.

He lay ruminating, hands under his head. Above him, the

white blotches still peered over the walkways; and for all he could see they had not moved since he had seen them first.

Steve Bishop settled himself nearby and sighed. Glystra eyed him with a moment's pity. Bishop was a student, fastidious, with no natural inclination for roughing it . . . Nancy returned from the forest. Glystra had watched her go with an instant suspicion and then had relaxed. It was impractical to supervise every waking moment of everyone. He must remember, he told himself, to send her home to Jubilith the first thing in the morning.

There was no sound in the clearing, other than the low mutter from the cluster of soldiers. Darrot and Elton stood stiff behind the ionic blaster, Ketch paced slowly along one side of the clearing, Vallussser along the other. Behind him, Nancy lay still and warm; Bishop slept like a baby, Pianza tossed fretfully.

The tension grew, and Glystra tried to place it objectively. Was it in Elton's tight alertness, in Darrot's rigidity? In the feel of Nancy at his back? Some subtle wrongness in the breathing of Bishop or Pianza? . . . He tried to see whom Abbigens might be watching, without success.

Minutes passed, a quarter hour, a half hour. The air was brittle as ice.

Moss Ketch took a couple of steps toward the blaster; he signaled, muttered a few words, backed off into the woods. The soldiers reacted with a small ripple of motion. A curt monosyllable from Darrot froze them.

Ketch returned, and Vallusser stepped into the woods. Again from the captives the quiver of alertness, and again Darrot's soft command and the slow subsidence of blue-clad shoulders, the sinking of the grotesque black felt hats.

There was a sudden shape behind the blaster, a sweep of sword, a startled cry, a bubble of pure pain . . . Then a stamp of feet, a stabbing flash of steel.

Teeth grinding together, Claude Glystra leapt to his feet, ion-shine in his hand.

At the blaster there was now but one man, crouching, swinging the tube toward Glystra Glystra saw it coming, saw the elbows tense . . He squeezed the handle of his ion-shine. There were crackling electric streaks down a violent ray. The man's head charred, shriveled; the blaster was smashed, flung askew. Glystra sprang about, facing the soldiers. They had raised to their feet and stood poised, undecided whether to attack or flee.

"*Sit down!*" said Glystra, his voice rasping, deadly. The soldiers slumped instantly.

Glystra reached in his pouch and tossed weapons to Pianza and Bishop. "Watch 'em from here; we don't have any more blaster."

He strode to the shattered field weapon, and saw three bodies. Elton was still alive. Bruce Darrot lay with his dead face turned up, frozen in rage. Vallusser's body sprawled across Darrot's legs.

Glystra looked down at the bent little body. "So it was Vallusser. I wonder what they bought him with."

Moss Ketch had unpacked the first-aid kit, and they knelt beside Elton. A thrust through the side of his neck was bleeding profusely. Glystra applied a clotting agent, antiseptic and sprayed an elastic film over the wound, which when dry would knit the edges of the cut.

He rose to his feet, stood looking down at Abbigens. "Your usefulness is liquated I've found out what I wanted to know."

Abbigens shook the thick yellow hair back out of his face. "Are you going to—kill me?"

"Wait and see." Glystra turned away. He looked at his watch. "Twelve o'clock." He tossed Elton's ion-shine to Ketch and turned to Pianza and Bishop. "You two sleep; we'll take it till three."

## VI. *THE GYPSIES*

DARROT AND VALLUSSER were buried in a common grave with the Beaujolains: the young swaggerer who had fallen from the tree and the six soldiers who had been killed when Glystra had first seized the blaster.

Abbigens heaved a great sigh when earth began to fall on the bodies. Glystra grinned; evidently Abbigens had expected to be one with the seven.

Shafts of sunlight, heavy and bright as bars of luminex, prodded down at a slant through the foliage. Pale smoke drifted up from the ashes of the campfire. It was almost time to leave.

Glystra looked around the clearing. Where was Nancy? There she stood, by the pack beasts, as inconspicuous as she was able to make herself. Behind her the tree trunks rose like the columns of a great temple, admitting brief glimpses of the sunlit slope.

Nancy felt Glystra's eye and turned him her quick, wide glance, a hopeful smile on her lips. Glystra felt his heart beating. He looked away. Elton was watching him with an unreadable expression. He compressed his lips and strode forward. "You'd better be on your way, Nancy back to Jubilith."

Her smile faded slowly; her mouth drooped, her eyes became moist. Apparently realizing the hopelessness of argument, she turned away without a word and crossed the clearing. At the edge of the forest, she paused, looked over her shoulder.

Claude Glystra watched silently.

She turned away. He watched her a few moments shoving through the trees. He saw her come out on the sunny bracken, listlessly start up the slope toward Jubilith.

Half an hour later, the column got under way. The

Beaujolains walked single file, each tied to the man ahead and behind by ankle ropes. They carried their swords and catapults, but the darts were packed in panniers, on one of the pack beasts.

The officer led the column; Abbigens was the last man. Then came the pack beasts, with Elton on a litter between the first two. He was awake and cheerful; he guarded the rear of the column with the big heat-gun.

The village overhead was awake, watching. As the column passed through the forest, the thud of feet sounded along the walkways, along with the creak of fiber fastenings. Sometimes the marchers heard a mutter of voices, a child crying. Presently a ceiling of tangled and tattered vegetation, supported by a patchwork of branches, vines and dried yellow fronds, cut off the sunlight. This second floor to the forest spread to a surprising extent, dank on the bottom, trailing bits and shreds of rotting vegetation.

"What do you make of that?" asked Pianza.

"Offhand," responded Glystra, "it looks like a hanging garden . . . We don't have an ecologist with us any more. Bruce probably would have known something about it. . . ."

Shafts of sunlight ahead indicated the end of the suspended field. Glystra went to the head of the line, where the officer walked, looking sullenly straight ahead. "What's your name?"

"Morwatz Leg-leader Zonander Morwatz, 112th at the Champs-Mars Academy."

"What were your orders?"

The officer hesitated, debating the propriety of answering the questions. He was a short man, with a round face, protuberant black eyes. He spoke in a slightly different dialect from his soldiers, and carried himself with a trace of self-importance.

"What were your orders?"

"We were placed at the command of the Earthman." Morwatz jerked his hand back toward Abbigens. "He carried

a cachet from Charley Lysidder, an instrument of great authority."

Glystra digested the information a moment, then asked, "An order addressed to you specifically?"

"To the commanding officer of the Montmarchy garrison."

"Hmmmm." Where had Abbigens obtained this order, signed by the Bajarnum of Beaujolais? There was a pattern here which, as yet, Claude Glystra was unable to see in the whole. Certainly the fact of Vallusser's guilt did not explain all the events of the last few weeks.

He asked further questions, and learned that Morwatz had been born into the Guerdons—a caste of lesser nobility—and was foolishly proud of the distinction. His home was the village of Pellisade, a few miles south of Grosgarth, and he believed Earth to be the home of a mindless robot race, obeying the sound of gongs and bells like machines. "We'd die here in Beaujolais, before we'd let ourselves be so degraded," declared Morwatz with fine fire.

Here was the obverse, thought Glystra, to the stereotype in Earth minds of the Big Planeter as a flamboyant, reckless creature. Grinning, he asked, "Do any of us look as if our powers of free will were lacking?"

"You're the elite. Here in Beaujolais we have never such tyranny as you experience on Earth. Oh, we've heard all about it, from people who know best."

Now he looked at Glystra sidelong. "Why do you smile?"

Glystra laughed. "*Naisuka*. The reason that is no reason at all."

Morwatz said suspiciously, "You use an extremely high-caste word. Even I would not feel proper speaking so."

"Well, well." Claude Glystra arched his eyebrows "You are not allowed to use certain words but neither do you live under tyranny."

"Precisely. As it should be." And now Morwatz screwed up his courage to ask a question of his own. "And what will you do with us?"

"If you obey orders, you'll have the same chances we have. I'm counting on you and your men to protect us on our march. Once we arrive at our destination, your life is your own."

Morwatz said with interest, "Where do you march for?"

"Earth Enclave."

Morwatz frowned. "I don't know the place. How many leagues?"

"Forty thousand miles. Thirteen thousand leagues."

Morwatz faltered in his stride. "You are mad!"

Glystra laughed. "We have the same man to thank for our troubles." He jerked his thumb. "Abbigens."

Morwatz found it difficult to shape his thoughts. "First there is Nomadland and the gypsies. If they capture us, they'll hitch us to their wagons and drive us like zipangotes." He nodded in the direction of the pack animals. "They are men of a different race and they detest the Beaujolams."

"They won't attack fifty men as readily as they might eight."

Morwatz shook his head despondently. "Last six-moon, Atman the Scourge raided deep into Beaujolais, and paved the way with the utmost in terror."

Glystra looked ahead through the thinning tree trunks, to the open slope ahead. "There's Nomadland, ahead of us. What lies beyond?"

"After Nomadland?" Morwatz wrinkled his brow. "First, the River Oust. And then the swamps, and the Ropemakers of Swamp Island. And after the swamps—"

"What?"

"Directly east, I don't know. Wild men, wild animals. Southerly is the land known as Felissima, and Kirstendale, and the monoline to Myrtlesee Fountain and the oracle. Past Myrtlesee is the Land of Stones, but of this I know nothing, since Myrtlesee is far to the east."

"How many leagues?"

"Several hundred. But it is hard to determine exactly.

From here to the river is—five days. To cross you must use the Edelweiss high-line to Swamp Island, or else you must follow the River Oust southwest back toward Beaujolais."

"Why can't we cross the river in boats?"

Morwatz made a wise face. "The griamobots."

"And what are they?"

"Savage river beasts. Horrible."

"Hm. And after the river? What then? How long to cross the swamps?"

Morwatz calculated. "If you journey east, four days—if you find a good swamp car. If you choose to bear southerly, you may take the monoline which leads down past the March—the Hibernian March, that is—to Kirstendale. Possibly six days or a week to Kirstendale. Then, if you're able to leave—"

"Why should we not leave?"

"Some do," said Morwatz with a sly wink. "Others don't . . . From Kirstendale the monoline runs west to Grosgarth, south through the Felissima tradetowns, east to Myrtlesee Fountain."

"How long to Myrtlesee from Kirstendale?"

"Oh"—Morwatz made a gesture—"two days, three days on the monoline. A dangerous trip otherwise, due to the tribesmen down from Eyrie."

"And beyond Myrtlesee?"

"Desert."

"And beyond?"

Morwatz shrugged. "Ask the Magic Fountain. If you are wealthy, and pay much metal, he will tell you anything you ask." He spoke with confidence.

Overhead the foliage thinned and the column broke out into the blinding Big Planet sunlight. The slope fell away ahead, a vast windy moor, rolling slightly concave before them. No human habitation or artifact was in sight, but far

to the north a dense pillar of smoke bent eastward in the wind.

Glystra halted the column, regrouped the soldiers, arranging them in a square around the pack beasts—zipangotes, so Morwatz called them. The beast carrying the darts was guarded by Elton, who was riding in a litter directly behind. He carried a catapult and dart in his hand, with the heat-gun tucked inside his shirt secure from any swift clutch. Abbigens walked at the right forward corner, Morwatz at the left rear. Flanking as guards to left and right were Pianza and Fayne with ion-shines; behind came Bishop and Ketch.

Two hours before noon they set forth across the moor, and as they marched, the tremendous slope behind them began to lose its bulk. The upper reaches became murked in the haze, the forest became a dark band The slope was leveling out.

A mutter from the soldiers reached his ears. They were faltering in their step and the whites showed in their eyes.

Following their gaze Claude Glystra saw along the horizon a dozen tall humpbacked zipangotes, approaching at a careless pace.

"Who are they? Gypsies?"

Morwatz scanned the column, his face set in rigid lines. "They're gypsies, but not the Cossacks. These are high caste warriors, possibly even Politboros. Only Politboros ride zipangotes. We can fight off Cossacks—they have little spirit, no discipline, no method, no mind. As soon as there are a few captives to sell, or hitch to their wagons, they are content. But the Politboros . . ." His voice faltered and he shook his head.

Glystra prompted him. "What about the Politboros?"

"They are the great warriors, the leaders. The Cossacks alone are mere robbers. When a Politboro leads them—demons!"

Glystra looked at Bishop. "Know much about these gypsies, Steve?"

"There's a short chapter in Vendome's *Big Planet Lore* on

the gypsies, but the emphasis is on their racial background rather than their culture. The stock was originally a tribe of Kirghiz herdsmen from Earth. Turkestan, I believe. When Cloud Control increased trans-Caucasian rainfall, they moved out to Big Planet, where steppes presumably would remain steppes. They shipped out third-class, and in the same hold were a tribe of old fashioned gypsies and a brotherhood of Polynesians. On the trip out, the gypsy leader, one Panvilsap, killed the Kirghiz headman, married the Polynesian matriarch, and when they were discharged on Big Planet, controlled the entire group. The ensuing culture was mingled Kirghiz, Polynesian and Romany, and dominated by the personality of Panvilsap."

The column was now less than a mile distant, approaching without haste.

Glystra turned to Morwatz. "How do these people live?"

"They herd zipangotes, hare-hounds, pechavies, milk-rats. They gather fungus from the hot springs, spore pods from the cycads in Depression. Spring and autumn they raid for slaves into Beaujolais and Kerkaten to the north, Ramspur to the south. The Oust cuts them off from Febssima and the Rebburs of Eyrie. Ah," sighed Morwatz, "what a grateful war that would be, between the Rebburs and the gypsies."

"Typical nomadic society," inserted Bishop. "Not a great deal different from the ancient Scythians."

Morwatz said fretfully, "Why are you so interested in the mannerisms of the race? Tonight, we will be pulling their wagons."

## VII. *ATMAN THE SCOURGE*

The sun was at zenith, and the coiled gray-green vegetation of the steppe gave off a smoky aroma. As the column approached, it was gradually joined by groups of Cossacks, who fell in behind the slow-jogging zipangotes.

Glystra asked Morwatz, "Is this their usual method of attack?"

Morwatz yanked at his black headgear. "They observe no usual methods."

Glystra said, "Order your men to take five darts apiece from the pack and stand ready for action."

Morwatz seemed to fill out, expand. He strode down the front of the square, barking orders. The Beaujolains straightened, formed harder ranks. In groups of five, they passed beside the pack animal which carried the darts, marched back into ranks.

Bishop said dubiously, "Aren't you afraid that—" He paused.

"I'm afraid to act afraid," said Glystra. "They'd be off like jack rabbits toward the forest. It's a matter of morale. We've got to act as if these gypsies were dirt under our feet."

"I guess you're right—in theory."

The mounted column halted a hundred yards across the moor, just out of catapult range. The beasts were heavier than those in the pack train—sleek, seal-brown, soft-padded creatures, with ridged convex backs, long, heavy necks. They were decked in trappings of shaggy leather painted with crude designs, and each wore a white rhinoceros-like horn strapped to its snout.

A tall, burly man sat on the first of the zipangotes. He wore blue satin trousers, a short black cloak, a peaked leather cap with cusped earpieces protruding at either side. A three-inch brass ring hung from each ear, and on each side of his chest he wore a medal of polished iron. He had a round, muscular, heavy-lidded face.

Glystra heard Morwatz mutter, "Atman the Scourge!"

Claude Glystra re-examined the man, noted his complete ease, an indifferent confidence more striking than any arrogance. Behind him rode a dozen others similarly garbed, and still farther behind skulked a hundred men and women

in beribboned and betasseled breeches of dull red, green or blue, heavy fustian blouses, leather skullcaps.

Glystra turned to check the formation of the Beaujolains—*thwingggg!* something sang past his throat like a hornet. He recoiled, ducked, looked full in the flat face of Abbigens, lowering his catapult with a curiously blank expression.

"Morwatz," said Glystra, "take the catapult from Abbigens, tie his wrists together and hobble him."

Morwatz hesitated a fraction of an instant, then spoke to a pair of soldiers.

There was a scuffle, which Glystra ignored—for now Atman and his Politboros had dismounted and were approaching.

Atman halted a few paces distant, half-smiling, toying with his quirt. "What is your thought encroaching on the land of the gypsies?" His voice was soft and fluent.

"We're heading for Kirstendale, past the swamps," said Glystra. "The route crosses Nomadland."

Atman drew back his lips, displaying teeth marvelously inlaid with minute bits of colored stone. "You discard your freedom, entering this land."

"The risk is to the slavers."

"From the soldiers?" Atman made a contemptuous gesture.

Glystra heard a whimper, a cry. "Claude—Claude—"

Hot blood pulsed in his brain. He stood swaying, then became conscious of Atman's amused scrutiny. "Who calls my name?"

Atman looked negligently over his shoulder. "A woman of the slopes we found by the forest this morning. She will fetch a handsome price."

Glystra said, "Bring her forth. I will buy her from you."

Atman said lazily, "Then you have wealth? This is a fortunate day for the gypsies."

Glystra tried to hold his voice steady. "Bring forth this woman, or I'll send a man to take her."

"A man? One man?" Atman's eyes narrowed. "What race

of man are you? Not Beaujolain, and you are too dark for a Maquir . . ."

Glystra casually brought forth his ion-shine. "I am an electrician." He grinned at his joke.

Atman rubbed his heavy chin. "In what parts live they?"

"It's not a race; it's an occupation."

"Ah! There are none such among us, we pursue our own business. We are warriors, killers, slavers."

Glystra came to a grim decision. He turned his head. "Bring out Abbigens." To Atman: "Electricians carry death in their every gesture."

Abbigens was thrust forward. Glystra said, "If killing you did not serve a practical purpose, I'd probably march you all the way to Earth Enclave for de-aberration." He raised the ion-shine. Abbigens' face was like risen dough; he began to laugh wildly. "What a joke! What a joke on you, Glystra!" The violet ray snapped out, power crackled down the conductive channel. Abbigens was dead.

Atman appeared faintly bored.

"Give me the woman," said Glystra, "or I'll bring this same death to you." He used the push-button rasp of authority. *"Quick!"*

Atman looked up in faint surprise, hesitated, then made a motion to his men. "Let him have her."

Nancy came limping forward, fell shaking and sobbing at Glystra's knees. He ignored her; he said to Atman, "Go your way and we go ours."

Atman had regained whatever composure he had lost. "I've seen those electrical clubs before. But they kill no more certainly than our lances. Especially in the dark, when lances come from many directions and the club points in only one."

Glystra turned to Morwatz. "Give the command to march."

Morwatz stood back, jerked his arm up and down. "Forward!"

Atman nodded, half-smiling. "Perhaps we shall meet again."

The Great Slope was a shadow behind the western haze; the steppe spread as wide as an ocean, carpeted with blue-green bracken except where black-green furze filled the deeper hollows. And behind were the gypsies, the Cossacks squatting around the heavier mass of the Politboros on their zipangotes.

In late afternoon, a dark shadow appeared in the distance. "Looks like trees, probably an artesian pond," said Fayne.

Claude Glystra looked around the horizon. "It seems to be the only shelter in sight. We'd better camp for the night." He looked uneasily toward the dark specks in the rear. "I'm afraid we're in for more trouble."

The shadow took on substance, became a copse of a dozen trees. Underneath was a carpet of blue-white moss and lush herbage.

At the center of the copse was a small pond bordered by fat rust-colored reeds. Glystra looked in suspicion at the water, which seemed brackish, but the Beaujolains drank it with relish. Beside the pond was a tall rick full of branches loaded with acorn-like fruit, beside the rick were tubs full of rank beer and a crude still.

The Beaujolains advanced eagerly to investigate the still. Morwatz ran shouting to stop them; reluctantly they turned back.

Glystra took a small cup from one of the packs and gave it to Morwatz. "Serve a measure to each of your men."

There was a whoop of approval, and Glystra said to Pianza, "If we could serve them grog every night, we'd never need to guard them."

Pianza shook his head. "Just children. Very little emotional control. I hope they don't become boisterous."

"Liquor or not, *we* can't relax. You and Fayne take the first four hours, Bishop, Ketch, and I will take the next four. Keep a sharp eye on the beast with the darts." He went to change the bandage on Elton's neck, but found Nancy there before him.

The Beaujolains, singing now, built a fire, and heaping on quantities of the branches from the rick, breathed in the aromatic smoke. Pianza called to Glystra in a worried voice. "They're fighting drunk. I hope they don't get any worse."

Glystra watched in growing apprehension. The Beaujolains were pushing and shouting, trying to shoulder into the densest clouds of smoke, where they stood with faces wreathed in foolish smiles. When they themselves had been pushed aside, immediately they raised angry outcries, cursed, pushed and elbowed a way back into the smoke.

"Must be a narcotic," said Glystra. "Big Planet marijuana." He stepped forward. "Morwatz!"

Morwatz, red-eyed and flushed from his own indulgence in the smoke, turned a reluctant face to the call. "Get your men fed and bedded down; enough of the smoke breathing."

Morwatz made a slurred acquiescence, and turning on his men, after a volley of curses, succeeded in bringing order to the camp. A tureen of porridge was prepared—wheat flavored with handfuls of dry meat and fungus.

Glystra went to squat beside Morwatz, where he ate a little apart from his troops. "What is that stuff?" He gestured toward the rick.

"It's called zygage—a very potent drug, very valuable." He puffed himself up. "Generally only the lowest castes inhale smoke—very vulgar, the crudest sensations—"

"How do you usually take it then?"

Morwatz breathed heavily. "Normally I do not take it at all. Zygage saps much vitality; smoke, potion or nose-salve, the user pays very dearly for his pleasure . . . But look you there, what manner of drug does your man take?"

Steve Bishop was swallowing his customary handful of vitamins.

Claude Glystra grinned. "That's a different kind of drug. It makes Bishop think he's healthy. He'd never know the difference if someone fed him chalk."

Morwatz was puzzled. "Another strange and useless Earth custom."

Glystra rejoined his companions. Nancy served Elton, then went to sit by herself among the zipangotes, as inconspicuous as possible.

From the fire came a sudden tumult of hoarse quarreling. A soldier had quietly cast a new armful of zygage branches on the flames, and Morwatz had come forward expostulating. The soldier, stumbling and red-eyed, cursed him back.

Glystra sighed. "Now it's discipline. Well"—he rose to his feet—"I suppose we've got to make an example."

Morwatz was pulling the smoking branches from the blaze; the soldier lurched up, kicked him. Morwatz fell face down into the coals.

Roger Fayne ran forward to pull at the screaming Morwatz; three soldiers leapt on his back and pulled him down. Pianza aimed the ion-shine, but held his fire for fear of shocking Fayne. Beaujolains came at him from all directions. He aimed, fired: *Snap—snap—snap.* Three soldiers fell flat, shriveled flesh. The others swarmed over him.

The clearing was suddenly alive with wild-eyed men, screaming and savage. One sprang at Ketch, toppled him. Glystra killed him with his ion-shine, then felt viciously strong arms seize him from behind, hurl him to the ground.

The Earthmen lay weaponless, arms lashed behind their backs.

Nearby, Morwatz lay moaning from deep in his throat. The soldier who had first kicked him deliberately drew his sword, and punctured Morwatz. He turned, came to look at his captives, tapped Glystra's chin with the sword. "Your death will not be at my hands. It's back to Grosgarth for you, and there'll be a reward to set us up as noblemen . . . Let Charley Lysidder have his will with you. . . ."

"The gypsies!" said Glystra in a choked voice. "They'll get us all!"

"Pah. Dirty animals!" He swung his sword in a wild

flourish. "We'll kill them as they come!" He gave a great exultant roar, a drug-addled cry of pure abandon. Leaping to the rick, he threw armful after armful of branches into the blaze. The smoke poured forth, the Beaujolains inhaled it in tremendous racking gulps.

Glystra tugged at his bonds, but they had been well-tied, cinched up with no regard for circulation. He craned his neck. Where was Nancy?

There was a distant sound that he found himself listening to, a far chanting from the steppe, a stave of four notes on a minor scale, punctuated by a rumbling bellow as of a bass horn.

The breeze shifted. Smoke from the smoldering zygage drifted through the rapt soldiers to float across the bound Earthmen. Twist, turn as they might, avoiding the smoke was impossible. Pungent and sweet, it blossomed up through their nostrils.

The first sensation was double, triple vitality, a thousandfold perceptiveness that saw, heard, felt, smelt with minuscule and catholic exactness. Each leaf on the tree became an identity, each pulse a singular and unique experience. Flitting swarms of pleasant experiences crowded into the mind. At the same time, another part of the mind was furiously active, problems became simplicities, hardships—such as the bonds and the prospect of death at the hands of Charley Lvsidder—were details hardly worth attention. And off in the distance the chanting waxed louder. Glystra heard it; surely the Beaujolains must hear it likewise . . .

The chanting was loud, close at hand. The Beaujolains at last heeded. They stumbled away from the fire, black hats askew, eyes bulging, bloodshot, faces distended, mouths gaping and gasping for air.

The leader raised his head like a wolf, screamed.

The cry pleased the Beaujolains. Each one threw back his head and echoed it. Now laughing, crying, they loaded

themselves with darts and ran out of the copse toward the gypsy horde.

The leader called out; the soldiers, without halting, ordered themselves into a loose formation, and charged into the afterglow.

The copse was quiet. Glystra rolled to his knees, struggled to his feet, looked around for means to loosen his bonds. Pianza called in a husky voice, "Stand still; I'll see if I can pull the ropes loose" He rose to his own knees, raised to his feet. He backed against Glystra's hands, fumbled with the thongs.

He gasped in frustration. "My fingers are numb . . . I can't move my hands . . ."

The Beaujolains had crossed the twilight steppe; now the gypsy chanting came to a halt, and only the deep bellow of the horn sounded Detail was blurred in the evening; Glystra could see men falling, then a convulsive Beaujolain charge.

The battle was lost in the dusk.

## VIII. *A MATTER OF VITAMINS*

GLYSTRA TRIED to break loose the knots on Pianza's wrists, without success. His fingers were like sausages, without sensation. He was suddenly weak; his brain felt inert. The aftermath of the drug.

The lid to the gypsy's still quivered and raised. Dripping, sodden, Nancy looked out wide-eyed, white-faced.

*"Nancy!* Come here, quick!"

She looked at Glystra as if dazed, moved uncertainly forward, paused, looked out across the steppe toward the melee.

The Beaujolain ululations rose shrill, keen, triumphant.

"Nancy!" cried Glystra. "Cut us loose—before they come back and kill us!"

Nancy looked at him with a strange contemplative expression.

A throbbing chorus of bellows, deep-voiced, rich, rang like bells across the air. There was an intermittent thudding sound, and the Beaujolain yelling choked off, ceased. A voice rose above all others: Atman the Scourge.

"*Nancy!*" cried Glystra. "Come here! Untie us! They'll be here any minute."

She sprang forward, took a knife from her sash. Cut, cut, cut. Earthmen stood about, rubbing their wrists, grimacing at the pain of restored circulation, torpid with zygage hangover.

Glystra muttered, "At least we need worry no further about guarding the Beaujolains."

"The gypsies will celebrate tonight," said Bishop. Alone in the group, he appeared alert. Indeed, he was more than alert, he evidently retained the mental edge and physical tone which the others had felt under influence of the zygage. Glystra watched him prance up and down. His own frame felt like a sack of damp rags.

Moss Ketch bent with the effort of an old man, picked up a shining piece of metal. "Someone's ion-shine."

Glystra searched the clearing, found his own weapon where it had been carelessly flung. "Here's mine . . . They were too steamed up to care about anything." The breeze brought a wisp of smoke into his face, new fingers of delight searched into his brain. "*Whew!* That stuff is powerful. . . ."

Steve Bishop had flung himself to the turf and was doing push-ups. Feeling the stares of the others, he jumped to his feet. "I just feel good," he said, grinning. "That smoke did me good."

There was silence from the steppes. Overhead in the pale sky, stars flickered.

The gypsy war-chant rose up, loud, close at hand. Something whuckered overhead, slashing through the leaves.

"Down!" hissed Glystra. "Arrows . . . Move away from the fire."

Loud came the chant: four notes on a querulous quavering scale, sung with syllables that carried no meaning.

Loud came Atman's voice. "Come forth, you strange men, you miserable intruders, come forth . . . I am Atman the Scourge, Atman the Slaver. Your life is a burden to you, your thoughts are heavy. Come, I will hitch you to my wagons, and you will eat grass, and there will be no thoughts to trouble you. Come to Atman . . ."

They saw his shape silhouetted, and behind him were a string of zipangotes. Glystra sighted along his ion-shine, then hesitated. It was like felling an ancient tree. He called, "You'd do better leaving us alone, Atman."

*"Bah!"* A sound of immeasurable disdain. "You dare not face me higher than your knees. Now I come to get you; put down your electrical tricks, bow your neck."

Glystra numbly started to lay down the ion-shine, then blinked, fought off the man's magnetism. He pushed the button. Purple sparks flashed at Atman, and buried into his chest, absorbed, defeated. *He's grounded!* thought Glystra in sudden panic.

Atman loomed on the afterglow, a heroic figure, larger than life . . . Bishop ran forward, closed with him. Atman bellowed, a ringing bull-sound. He bent, Bishop twisted, rose up beneath. Atman performed a majestic cartwheel, struck earth with a ponderous jar. Bishop sat casually on him, made play with his hands, then stood up. Glystra approached, still numb. "What did you do?"

"Tried out a few judo tricks," said Bishop modestly. "I had an idea the fellow won his battles with his voice, his hypnotic suggestion. I killed him dead as a mackerel, one tap in the right place."

"I never knew you were a judo expert."

"I'm not . . . I read a book on the subject a few years

back, and it came to me all at once—my word, all those zipangotes!"

"They must have belonged to the other Politboros that the Beaujolais killed. They're ours now."

"Where are the other gypsies?"

Glystra listened. There was not a sound to be heard across the steppes.

"They've gone. Melted away."

They returned to the copse leading the zipangotes. Glystra said, "We'd better get going."

Fayne stared. "Now?"

"Now!" Glystra snapped. "I don't like it any more than you do but"—he pointed to the zipangotes—"at least we can ride."

Morning, midday, afternoon—the Earthmen slumped on the curved backs of the zipangotes, half-dazed with fatigue. The gait was a smooth, rocking pitch, not conducive to sleep. Evening came with a slow dimming of the sky.

A fire was built in a hollow, a pot of wheat porridge boiled and eaten, two-hour sentry watches set, and the column bedded down.

The next morning, Glystra opened his eyes to observe Bishop running lightly back and forth along the side of the slope. Glystra rubbed his eyes, yawned, hauled himself to his feet. Feeling dull and feverish, he called irritably to Bishop, "What in the world's come over you? I never knew you to go in for early morning exercise before."

A flush mounted Bishop's long, homely face. "I can't understand it myself. I just feel good. I've never felt so well in my life. Perhaps my vitamins are taking hold."

"They never took hold before we got all doped up with that zygage. Then they took hold like ice-tongs, and you ran out and played hell with Atman."

"Do you think that drug has permanently affected me?"

Glystra rubbed his chin. "If it has, it seems to be a good thing—but why did it give the rest of us hangovers? We all

ate the same, drank the same . . . Except—" He eyed Bishop speculatively. "It occurs to me that you'd crammed yourself with vitamins—just before the smoke hit us."

"Well, yes. That's true. So I did. I wonder if possibly there's a connection . . . Interesting thought . . ."

"If I ever lay my hands on any more of that zygage," muttered Glystra, "I'll find out for sure."

Four days of steady travel passed, from dawn till sunset. They saw no human being until, on the afternoon of the fourth day, they came upon a pair of young gypsy girls. They were perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, and were tending a score of sluggish animals, yellow-furred, the size of sheep—pechavies. They wore tattered gray smocks and their feet were tied in rags.

They deserted their animals and ran forward. "Are you foreign slavers?" asked the first happily. "We wish to be slaves."

"Sorry," said Glystra dryly. "We're just travelers. Besides, your own people are slavers. Why seek out the foreigner? And why are you so anxious?"

The girls giggled, eyeing Claude Glystra as if his question were obtuse. "Slaves are fed often and eat from dishes. Slaves may step under a roof when the rain comes. Gypsies will not sell their own people, and we have it harder than slaves."

Glystra looked at them irresolutely. If he set about righting the wrongs of everyone they met, they would never arrive at Earth Enclave. He looked over his shoulder.

Elton caught his eyes. "I could use a good servant," he said easily. "You—what's your name?"

"I'm Motta. She's Wailie."

Glystra said weakly, "Anyone else?"

Pianza shook his head. Roger Fayne snorted, turned away.

Steve Bishop said tentatively, "I'll take her."

Three more days of riding the steppe, each exactly alike.

On the fourth day the land changed. The bracken grew taller and harder to ride through, almost like Earthly manzanita. There were occasional flamboyant shrubs six feet tall, with leaves like peacock fans. Ahead appeared a low black blur, which the gypsy girls identified as the bank of the River Oust.

In the middle afternoon they came upon Edelweiss, a stockaded fort, with three-story blockhouses at each corner.

Motta explained. "Sometimes the South Cossacks raid the Magickers. They are not allowed at the Rummage Sale, because the sight of bare knees drives them mad and they run killing-crazy. But they love the gray powder salt which comes up the river from Gammerei and the Magickers have it in stock, and that is why Edelweiss is girt up with such care."

The town was illumined full-face by the afternoon sun, and across the clear distance appeared as a toy, a miniature, colored dark and light brown, with black windows, light green and black roofs. From the center of town rose a tall pole, with a cupola at the top, like the crow's-nest of a ship.

Motta explained the purpose of the pole. "The high-wire to Swamp Island is made fast at the top of the pole. And then the Magickers always watch the distance; they read the clouds as signs, and the wise among them see the future."

"By watching clouds?"

"So it is said. But we know little, being females."

They continued to the river, and with the afternoon sun at their backs stood looking over the tremendous Oust. It flowed from the far north, appearing into sight out of the hazy distance, and proceeded into the equally distant south, curving back toward the west. Cat's-paws vibrated the surface, and at intervals there came a roiling-up from below, as if a monster fin had set the water into turbulent motion. The other shore, two or three miles distant, was

low and flat, and overgrown with a dense forest of poles two hundred feet tall. A long island overgrown with feathery foliage split the center of the river like a wedge.

"Look!" Fayne cried hoarsely—unnecessarily, for every eye was straining, fascinated. Floating from behind the island came a black monster. Its body was round and sleek, its head was like a frog, split by a vast mouth. The head darted forward as they watched, chewed and champed at something in the water, then lowered lazily, lay flat. The creature circled, drifted out of sight behind the island.

Fayne released his breath. "*Whew!* That's a devilish thing to have for a neighbor."

Pianza searched the face of the river with concern. "I wonder that anyone dares to cross. . . ."

Elton pointed. "They use the high-line."

It was a thin gray-white cable, swooping from the pole in the village to one of the spines of the forest on the opposite shore. The low point at the center was only fifty feet above the water.

Glystra snorted in disgust. "They've got the river crossing sewed up, and no mistake . . . I suppose we'd better apply for transportation."

"That's how the Magickers acquire their wealth," said Motta.

Fayne muttered, "They'll probably make us pay through the nose. . . ."

Claude Glystra rubbed his short black thatch. "It's a case of take it or leave it. We've got to take it."

They set out along the lip of the bluff toward the village.

Above them towered the walls of Edelweiss, two-foot timbers, peeled, set into the ground like piles, lashed at the top with coarse fiber and evidently fastened elsewhere with dowels. The wood appeared punky and soft. Glystra thought that anyone determined on entry could easily chop his way in with a hatchet.

They stopped by the gate, which opened at the rear of a rectangular alcove, well buttressed with extra courses of timber. The gate was open, revealing a short passage walled on either side and cut off at the far end by another wall.

"Strange," said Glystra. "No guards, no gate-keeper . . . In fact—no one."

"They're afraid," said Wailie. She raised her voice. "Magickers! Come out and lead us to the high-line!"

There was no overt response. A stealthy rustle sounded behind the walls.

"Come out," yelled Motta, "or we'll burn the walls!"

"Good Lord!" muttered Pianza. Bishop wore an agonized expression.

Wailie sought to outdo her companion. "Come out and give us welcome—or it's the sword for all within!"

Steve Bishop clapped his hand over her mouth. "Are you crazy?"

Motta shrieked, "We'll kill the Magickers and slide the town into the river!"

There was motion in the passageway. Three old men, bald, feeble, came forward. Their bare feet were blue-veined and bony, they wore only ragged loin-cloths.

"Who are you?" quavered the first. "Go your ways, disturb us not; we have nothing of value."

"We want to cross the river," said Glystra. "Take us across, and we won't disturb you any further."

The old men engaged in a wheezing colloquy, watching Glystra suspiciously as they whispered. Then: "It is too late in the year. You must wait."

"Wait!" demanded Glystra indignantly. "Out here?"

"We are the quiet Magickers, innocent sorcerers and tradespeople. You are men of the Savage Lands, and doubtless you come to loot our valuables."

"The eight of us? Nonsense. We want to cross the river."

The old man said in a quavering voice, "It is impossible."

"Why?"

"It is forbidden." The old man withdrew. The gate slammed.

Glystra chewed his lip in frustration. "Why in the devil—"

Asa Elton pointed to the tower. "There's a heliograph up there. It's been shooting signals west. My guess is that they've had orders from the Beaujolais."

Glystra grunted "In that case, it's more urgent than ever to get across. Here we're trapped."

Fayne advanced to the bank, peered over. "No boats in sight."

"Not even material to make a raft,' said Pianza.

"A raft wouldn't help us," Fayne pointed out. "There's no way to propel it, no sails, no sweeps."

Glystra looked up at the walls of Edelweiss. Elton grinned. "Are you thinking the same thoughts I'm thinking?"

"I'm thinking that a piece of that wall the section running parallel to the river, right there, would make a fine raft."

"But how would we cross the river?" demanded Fayne "There's a good current out there, we'd be swept all the way down to Marwan Gulf."

"There's a way staring you in the face." Glystra made a lasso out of a length of pack-rope. "I'm going to climb the wall; you cover me from below."

He tossed the loop around a timber, hauled himself up, cautiously peered over the top, scrambled over.

He looked down. "There's no one up here. It's a kind of roof. One of you come up—Elton."

Elton joined him. Behind were blank walls and shielded windows, all silent.

## IX. *THE GRIAMOBOT*

THERE WAS a sound behind them; Moss Ketch hauled himself over the wall. "Thought I'd see what the place looked like." He looked over the flat roofs. "Pretty dingy."

"Notice the wall," said Glystra. "It's lashed along the top with rope, secured along the middle by dowels. If we cut the rope, break the dowels—there, there, there"—he pointed up a vertical crack where the dowels showed through—"and if a man were to shove at each corner, I think we could drop the wall right over into the river."

"How about those sea serpents—the griamobots?" Ketch asked.

"They're an unknown quantity. We'll have to take a chance."

"They might come up under the raft."

Glystra nodded. "It's a chance. Would you rather stay here?"

"No."

Elton stretched out his long arms. "Let's get busy."

Glystra looked at the sky. "An hour of light. Enough to get us across, if things go well. Ketch, you go back down, take the whole party, zipangotes and all, down to the beach under the bluff. Naturally, keep clear when things start coming. We'll send the wall down; if it lands in the river, make it fast to the shore, so it won't float away."

Ketch swung himself back down to the ground.

Claude Glystra turned back to the wall. "We've got to get this over before they figure out what we're up to." He looked over the side. Twenty feet below was the edge of the bluff; it was another fifty feet, almost straight down, to the beach.

"There won't be any toe hold to the wall. It should go over almost of its own weight."

"Fifty feet of it ought to be enough," said Elton. "The wood is light stuff."

"It's not how much we need, it's how much we can get. I don't think they'll stand still when we get to work."

Along the beach below they saw the string of zipangotes, with Ketch, Pianza, Bishop, Fayne and the three girls.

Glystra nodded to Elton, drew his knife, and slashed at

the fiber rope binding the top of the wall. A sudden outraged screeching came from behind. Apparently from nowhere appeared four old women, howling and gesticulating. A number of Magicker men, lean, white-skinned, daubed around their shoulders with green paint, appeared behind them.

The coarse rope parted. "Now," said Glystra. He aimed his ion-shine, squeezed the button. Once twice three times. Three holes down, the vertical crack took the place of the pegs. Setting their shoulders to the top of the posts, they pushed out. The wall leaned, creaked, moved no farther.

"Below," panted Glystra. "There are more lashings halfway down." He crouched, peered into the dimness under the roof "We'll have to shoot blind . . . You break your side, I'll do mine."

Two shafts of pale purple light bespoke crackling power. A tongue of fire licked up the punky side of the timbers, died in a charred smoulder.

The wall sagged, creaked. "Now," panted Glystra, "before they get their army up here . . . Don't go over with it!"

The wall lurched, swept grandly out, and fell; it landed top-down on the beach, stood a second, sagged outward, then slapped into the river with a smash of foam.

Glystra caught a glimpse of Ketch scrambling out with a bit of line, then turned to meet the onrush of a line of the Magickers—gaunt men, all They chattered furiously, but danced back like nervous prize fighters when they met his eye.

The women screeched, bawled, bellowed, and wailed, but the men only made tentative movements forward. Glystra threw a glance down to the river. The wall now a raft—floated free, pulling at the rope Ketch had made fast. Fayne and Pianza stood on the shore looking up. Glystra yelled down, "Lead the animals aboard, tie them in the middle."

Bishop called up something that Glystra did not catch;

he turned away. The Magickers were stealthily sliding closer. "Get back! Back!" he said flatly. "Or I'll cut your legs out from under you."

But his words were not heeded. The Magickers, lips drawn back from their long teeth, were prancing forward, a step at a time. Suddenly they all were brandishing four-foot pikes tipped with black horny barbs.

"Looks as if we'll have to kill a few," said Glystra between tight lips, "unless they'll scare . . ." He aimed the ion-shine at the roof and blasted a hole in the roof at the feet of the nearest Magicker.

The Magicker never shifted his gaze; his eyes had become fixed.

"They're crazy—hysterics," muttered Glystra. "Poor devils, I don't like it. . . ." He squeezed the button. Gaunt forms flapped on the roof, leapt across the roof to the stairs, black warlock silhouettes, with tatters of cloth flying behind.

Glystra went to the edge and yelled down, "Get a line ready, and make it fast to what's coming next."

Asa Elton was looking up the pole. "We'd better drop the whole works, pole and all. Otherwise, the cable will snap past so fast they won't be able to see it. Notice—three of those guy-lines run to the top, three to the buckle-point at the middle. If we cut off the three at the top, the pole should snap off nice and neat."

Glystra examined the magazine of his ion-shine, squinting in the failing light. "Got to go easy on the power. There's not too much left in this one." He aimed and squeezed the button.

Three gray cables sang, fell twisting like snakes over the roofs of Edelweiss. The pole snapped like a carrot, and crashed almost at their feet; the crying stopped abruptly.

Elton called over the side, "Here it comes . . . Heads up!"

The tension of the cable dragged the stub across the roof, over the edge of the bluff.

"Lay hold of it!" Glystra yelled. "Make it fast to the raft!" He started to scramble down the wall, Elton at his heels. They ran along the bluff, found a place to scramble down to the beach.

"Hurry," yelled Pianza. "Our shore line can't take all the strain; it'll go in a minute."

Glystra and Elton waded out into the river, scrambled up onto the soft timbers. "Let 'er go."

The raft drifted free. Behind them, the bluff made a black smear across the afterglow; and perched high was Edelweiss, bereft and forlorn. "Poor devils," said Glystra.

The raft floated out on the river, carried downstream by the current but tethered to the opposite shore by the cable of the broken high-line.

"Ah," sighed Fayne, dropping his heavy posterior to the logs. "Peace—quiet—it's wonderfull"

"Wait till you get to the other side before you rejoice," said Ketch. "There's still the gnamobots."

Fayne rose swiftly to his feet. "I'd forgotten about them. My Lord! Where are they? . . . If it's not one thing it's another. . . ."

"Look," said Bishop in a soft voice. Heads turned as if activated by cams; eyes went to the object inching over the edge of the raft a flat, glistening thing, solid and muscular. It quivered, jerked up on the raft, another six inches, becoming round in cross-section.

Another six inches . . . Eli Pianza laughed. Bishop moved forward. "I thought it was the end of a tentacle."

"It's a big fluke—some sort of leech."

"Disgusting thing." Bishop kicked it back into the river.

The raft gave a sudden lurch, swerved, twisted. Domes of water boiled up around them.

"Something below," whispered Glystra.

Motta and Wailie began to whimper.

"Quiet!" snapped Glystra. They stifled the sound. The motion ceased; the water subsided.

Steve Bishop touched Glystra's arm. "Look up on the Edelweiss cliff."

A torch had appeared. It shone, went out, shone, went out—time and time again, for varying intervals.

"Code. They're talking to someone. Probably across the river to Swamp Island Hope no one cuts the cable at that end."

"Fayne could swim ashore with a message," suggested Elton. Fayne snorted indignantly, and Elton chuckled.

From behind the island came the griamobot, its head high, questing. The dark concealed its features; all that was evident were big segmented eyes. Water swished and gurgled past the black hulk of its body, from which came a visceral growling sound.

The head wove, swayed back and forth, then suddenly darted forward.

"It sees us," muttered Glystra. He drew his ion-shine. "Perhaps I can damage it or scare it away . . . There's not enough power here for real effect if the brute is determined. . . ."

"Knock the head off," said Eli Pianza tremulously. "Then it won't be able to see us."

Glystra nodded. The violet beam touched the head. It snapped off like a kicked paper bag. But the neck continued to weave, back and forth, back and forth, and the beast never slowed or changed direction.

Glystra aimed at the body, fired. There was a ripping sound and a ragged hole appeared on the dark hide. White objects seemed to boil up.

Glystra stared, fired again, at the water line. The monster cried out in a babble of human voices.

The hulk wabbled, wallowed, white shapes poured out through the hole.

"Duck!" cried Glystra. "They're throwing at us!"

*Thud!* A pike plunged quivering into the wood beside

him. Another—another—then a sound unlike the others: a shock and a long throaty gasp.

Glystra raised up. *"Ketch!"*

Moss Ketch tore feebly at the shaft in his chest and fell forward on his knees, inched yet farther forward, bowed his head, with the shaft grasped between his hands; and in this position he froze.

"They're boarding us!" yelled Fayne.

"Stand aside!" cried Pianza. He elbowed past Fayne. Lavish plumes of orange flame issued from the heat-gun, and wreathed the thin shapes, who threw up their arms and fell backward into the river.

The griamobot hulk had settled low in the water, drifted down-current, past the raft and away.

Claude Glystra gently lay Ketch on his side. His hands were locked on the shaft.

Glystra stood up, looked across the dusk toward Edelweiss; then after a moment, turned back to Ketch. "Fayne—help me."

He lay hold of Ketch's lax ankles. Roger Fayne bent, took the shoulders, hesitated. "What are you going to do?"

"Drop him in the river. I'm sorry. We can't afford emotion."

Fayne opened his mouth, stuttered, stammered. Glystra waited.

Fayne finally said in a subdued voice, "Don't you think we should—well, give him a burial? A decent burial?"

"Where? In the swamp?"

Fayne bent to the body.

Glystra stood looking up at Edelweiss. "The griamobot was a hoax. A commercial enterprise, to frighten people off the river, to funnel them through the Edelweiss high-line. . . ."

Night lay heavy over Big Planet, and the shores were dark. There was silence aboard the raft. Little black waves lapped at the timbers. Downstream they floated, borne

by the current; cross-stream, pulled by the tether of the one-time high-line.

The spines of Swamp Island towered above them. The chirping and rasping of myriad small insects came to their ears. No lights were visible.

The raft bumped gently into a ledge of mud, halted.

"We'll have to wait for light," said Glystra. "Let's try to get some sleep . . ."

But all sat staring across the black water, feeling the loss of Ketch as a tongue feels the gap left by a drawn tooth.

Dawn came to the water, seeping in from nowhere, moth-colored, the softest luminosity conceivable. To the east, the sky flared orange, yellow, behind the black spines of the Swamp Island forest. They were two hundred feet tall, crowding till in some instances the trunks touched.

Motta screamed, a mindless piping. Glystra swung around; his heart expanded, his blood caked. A tremendous black body blotted out the river; overhead swung a barrel-size head, split by a bony mouth. The head swung down, the eyes stared, the neck looped; the head plunged into the water and returned laden with sodden yellow fiber. It gulped, belched, sank out of sight into the river.

Life returned to the raft. Hysterical women. . . .

Glystra released a great pent-up sigh. "Evidently the griamobots exist."

"I will vouch for it at any time," declared Roger Fayne.

"But—they're vegetarians. The Magickers arranged that they should be thought carnivorous; all that was necessary to confine river traffic to the high-line . . . Well, let's get moving."

The raft floated flat and vacant on the river. The zip-angotes stood loaded and ready on spongy black humus, raising their feet up and down, swinging their long necks close to the ground.

Glystra walked a little way into the swamp, testing the footing. The round boles, ash-gray overlaid with green luster, prevented a clear vision of more than a hundred feet; but so far as Glystra could see, the ground was uniformly black peat, patched with shallow water.

Glystra returned to the river. The zipangotes had been arranged in line, each long doglike head under the hindquarters of the beast ahead. "Let's go," he said.

The river fell behind and was quickly lost to sight. The caravan wound like a snake in tall grass—now left, now right, twisting, side-stepping, detouring the puddles of water.

The sun rose, and they rode through shafts and bars of heavy light, and zebra striping lay along the tall spines.

## X. *THE MONOLINE*

About noon, there was a sudden opening before them—a lake. Small waves rippled and glinted at their feet; clouds reflected between areas of deep blue In the distance floated a few low boats with wide double-lateen booms and baggy orange sails; and beyond was Swamp City It sat up in the air, on top of the forest, like a mirage; it reminded Glystra of an old-world fishing village.

For several moments the party stood staring at the city on stilts . . . A shrill squawking startled them: a blue and yellow flying thing, beating sluggishly through the air.

"For a moment," said Fayne, "I thought the Magickers were upon us."

Back to the forest—more winding, squeezing, doubling back, occasionally a straight run of twenty or thirty feet.

The sun moved across the sky; at last, in the middle of the afternoon, Glystra saw overhead the walls and houses of the city. Five minutes later, the caravan moved into the shadow of the deck.

"A moment, please," said an unhurried voice. A platoon of warriors stood beside them, stocky men in mulberry-colored coats.

The officer approached Glystra. "Your business, if you please?"

"No business. We're travelers."

"Travelers?" The officer glanced at the zipangotes. "From where?"

"From Jubilith, north of Beaujolais."

"How did you get those beasts across the river? Certainly not on the high-line; our agent would have reported you."

"We ferried them over on a raft. Last night."

The officer fingered his mustache. "Did not the griamobots—"

Claude Glystra smiled. "The Magickers have been hoaxing you. The griamobots are vegetarians, harmless. The only dangerous griamobot was one the Magickers built and filled with soldiers."

The officer swore under his breath. "Lord Wittelhatch will wish to hear this. Magicker regulations and tariffs have long irked him, especially since he strung up the cable to begin with."

"The cable interests me," said Glystra. "Is it metal?"

"Oh no, by no means." The officer laughed affably—a handsome young man with an expressive face and a jaunty straw-colored mustache. "Come, I'll lead you to where your caravan may rest, and along the way you'll see the working of our industry. We are rope-makers to the world, nowhere is cable equal to ours."

Glystra hesitated. "Our wish was to continue as far along the way as possible before nightfall. Perhaps you will direct us—"

"A wealthy man in a hurry," said the officer, "would ride the monolme. It would cost much metal, much metal . . . Best confer with Wittelhatch."

"Very well." Glystra motioned to the column; they fol-

lowed the officer, and came upon a scene of industry.

A series of rope-walks occupied an area five hundred feet square, which had been partially cleared, leaving only enough spines to support the weight of the city above. Each rope-walk consisted of a series of frames. In the process of formation, the rope passed through a hole in the frame and immediately afterward passed through a wheel, which rotated around the rope as an axis. Fixed at regular intervals on the wheel were five fat slugs, and from them positors white strands ran to the rope. As the rope pulled through the frame, the wheel rotated and five new strands were added to the rope.

Glystra sighted up the rope-walk. Each frame had its wheel, and each wheel carried five slugs secreting thread for the rope. "Very clever," said Glystra. "Very clever indeed."

"Our rope is unexcelled," said the officer, with a proud twist of his mustache. "Flexible, weatherproof, strong. We furnish rope for the monolines of Felissima, Bogover, Thelma, the long line to Grosgarth in Beaujolais and the line out to Myrtlesee Fountain."

"Hm . . . And Just what is a monoline?"

The officer laughed. "Now you joke with me. Come, I will take you to Wittelhatch, and he will doubtless feast you at his evening wassail. I understand an excellent conger bakes in his oven."

"But our packs, our luggage! And the zipangotes, they have not eaten yet; there is nothing in this swamp for them to eat!"

The officer signaled; four men stepped forward. "Service and groom the beasts, feed them well, pluck their sores, wash and bind their feet, set them out each a dram of dympel." He said to Glystra, "Your baggage will be secure; Swamp Island knows no thieves. Merchants and industers we be, but robbers no—it is against our rotes."

Wittelhatch was a fat man with a round red face—half-

petulant, half jocular—and crafty, heavy-lidded eyes. He wore a white blouse embroidered with red and yellow frogs, a red brocade surcingle, tight blue trousers, and black boots. In each ear hung a gold ring, and each finger was heavy with assorted metals. He sat in a ceremonial chair, apparently having just lowered himself into place, for he was still wrestling with the folds of his garments.

The officer bowed gracefully and indicated Claude Glystra with a debonair motion. "A traveler from the west, Lord."

"From the west?" Wittelhatch, narrow-eyed, rubbed one of his sub-chins. "I understand that the high-line across the river has been cut. It will be necessary to kite it back into place. How then did you cross?"

Glystra explained the Magicker hoax. Wittelhatch became shrill and angry. "The long white muckers and all the business I've sent them out of pity! Hey, but it discourages an honest community to be set so close to rascals!"

Glystra said with restrained impatience, "Our wish is to proceed on our way. Your officer suggested that we use the monoline."

Wittelhatch immediately became businesslike. "How many are in your party?"

"Eight, together with our baggage."

Wittelhatch turned to the officer. "What do you suggest, Osrik? Five singles and a pack?"

The officer squinted thoughtfully. "Their baggage is considerable. Better, perhaps, two packs and two singles. And since they are unused to the trolleys, a guide."

"What is your destination?" Wittelhatch inquired.

"As far east as possible."

"That's Myrtlesee . . . Well now, I care little to let my trolleys journey to such vast extents; you must pay substantially. If you buy the trolleys outright—ninety ounces of good iron. If you rent sixty ounces, plus the guides' pay and a reasonable return fee—another ten ounces."

Glystra haggled politely, and reduced the rental to fifty

ounces plus the zipangotes, and Wittelhatch would pay the guide. "Perhaps, Osrik, you would care to lead the party?" Wittelhatch inquired of the young officer.

Osrik twisted his blond mustache. "Delighted."

"Good," said Glystra. "We'll leave at once."

Wind blew in sails, and trolley wheels whispered down the monoline—a half-inch strand of white Swamp Island cable. From the dome at Swamp City, the line led from spine to spine across three miles of swamp to a rocky headland; it crossed over the rotten basalt with only six feet to spare, swung in a wide curve to the southeast. At fifty-foot intervals, L-brackets mounted to poles supported the line, so designed that the trolleys slid across with only a tremor and slight thud of contact.

Osrik rode the first trolley, Glystra followed, then came a pair of three-wheel freight carriers loaded with packs -food, spare clothing, the metal which represented their wealth, Bishop's vitamins, Fayne's camping gear, odds and ends from the Beaujolain packs. The first of the freight carriers was manned by Elton, Motta and Waulie; the second by Nancy, Pianza and Bishop. Fayne, in a one-man trolley, brought up the rear.

As he examined the vehicle he rode in, Claude Glystra well understood Wittelhatch's reluctance to part with it, even temporarily. The wood was shaped and fitted with painstaking precision, and performed as well as any metal machine from the shops of Earth.

The big wheel was laminated from ten separate strips, glued, grooved and polished. Spokes of hardened withe supported the central hub, whose bearings were wrought from a greasy black hardwood. The seat support was a natural tree crook, connecting to a slatted floor below. Propulsion was achieved by sails, set to a lateen boom The halyards, outhauls and sheets led to a cleat-board in front of the seat. Within reach was a double hand-crank, offset like the pedals

of a bicycle; turning the crank would drive the trolley up any slight slope at the end of a long suspension which momentum and the pressure of the sails were unable to negotiate.

At noon, the land changed. Hills heaved up and it became necessary to make portages, which involved carrying the trolleys and all the baggage up to a higher level of line.

At the end of the day, they slept in a vacant cottage near one of the portages and the next morning set off through the mountains the Wicksill Range, according to Osrik. The line swooped far across valleys, from ridge to ridge, with the ground sometimes two thousand feet below. The trolleys, starting out across such a valley, fell into the sag of the cable with a stomach-lifting swoop, falling almost free; then, out in the middle, the speed would slacken and the trolley would coast on momentum up toward the opposite ridge and presently slow almost to a stop. Then the sail would be trimmed to its fullest efficience and the drive-crank would be put into use, and gradually the trolley would climb up to the high point.

On the evening of the third day, Osrik said, "Tomorrow at this time we should be in Kirstendale, and you must be surprised by nothing you see."

Glystra pressed for further information, but Osrik was disposed to be jocular. "No, no. You will see for yourself. Possibly you may abandon your fantastic journey and settle in Kirstendale."

"Are the people unfriendly?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Who rules them? What is their government?"

Osrik raised his eyebrows thoughtfully. "Now that you mention it, I have never heard of a ruler in Kirstendale. Indeed, they rule themselves, if their life could be said to be governed by rule."

"How many days from Kirstendale to Myrtlesee Fountain?"

"I've never made the trip. It is not entirely pleasant. At certain seasons, the Rebbirs come down from the Eyrie to molest the monoline travelers, although the Dongmen of Myrtlesee are Rebbir stock and try to maintain an open avenue of communication."

"What lies past Myrtlesee Fountain?"

Osrik made a gesture of disgust. "The desert. The land of fire-eating dervishes; scavengers, vampires, so I'm told."

"And after?"

"Then the Palo Malo Se Mountains and the Blarengorran Lake. From the lake, the Monchevior River runs east, and you might float a considerable distance on one of the river boats—how far I am uncertain, because it flows into the obscure and unknown."

Glystra heaved a thoughtful sigh. By the time the Monchevior River floated them out of Osrik's ken, there would still be thirty-nine thousand miles to Earth Enclave.

During the night, a rainstorm broke, and there was no escape from the roaring wind. The travelers straggled up under the lee of a boulder and huddled under their blankets while the Big Planet gale drove north.

Wet and cold they saw a bleared gray dawn come; for a time the rain stopped, though clouds fleeted past on the wind almost within hand's-reach overhead. Climbing upon their trolleys, they set handkerchiefs of sail and scudded along the monoline with wheels whirring.

For two hours the line led along the ridge, and the wind pressed up and over the mountain like a water spill. The vegetation, low shrubs with tattered blue-green streamers of leaves, whipped and flapped below. To the left was a dark valley full of gray mist; to the right the clouds hid the panorama, but when they broke and parted, a pleasant broken country could be seen—hills, forests, small lakes, and several times they glimpsed great stone castles.

Osrik looked back at Glystra, swept his hand over the land

to the right. "The Galatudanian Valley, with the Hibernian March below. A land of dukes and knights and barons, robbing one another . . . Dangerous country to walk afoot."

The wind increased. Heeling far to the side, the trolleys skimmed southeast at sixty miles an hour, and they might have traveled faster had not Osrik constantly luffed wind from his sails.

For an hour they wheeled along the line, swaying and jerking; and then Osrik rose in his seat and signaled to furl sail.

The trolleys coasted to a platform, from which a line led at a right angle to their course, down into the valley. The far anchor was invisible; all that could be seen was the gradually diminishing swoop of the white cable.

Nancy peered down the line, drew back with a shiver.

Osrik grinned. "This is the easy direction. Coming back, a person must make a two-day portage from the valley floor."

"Do we slide down—out there?" asked Nancy in a hushed voice.

Osrik nodded.

"We'll kill ourselves going so fast; it's so—steep!"

"The wind presses on you, brakes your fall. There's nothing to it. Follow me. . . ."

He turned his trolley down the slanting line, and in an instant was a far dwindling shape vibrating down the wind.

Claude Glystra stirred himself. "I guess I'm next . . ."

It was like stepping out into nothing, like diving headfirst over a cliff . . . The first mile was almost free fall. The wind buffeted, cloud-wisps whipped past, the land below was an indeterminate blur.

Overhead, the wheel sang into high pitch, though it carried almost no weight. The white line stretched out ahead, always curving slightly up, away, out of vision.

Glystra became aware that the whirr of the wheel was de-

creasing in pitch; the line was flattening out, the ground below was rising to meet him.

Across a green and yellow forest he rolled and below he glimpsed a settlement of log cabins, with a dozen children in white smocks staring up . . . Then they were gone and ahead he saw a platform hung in the top of a giant tree, and here waited Osrik.

Glystra climbed stiffly to the platform. Osrik was watching him with a smile. "How did you like the swoop?"

"I'd like to move at that speed for three weeks. We'd be at the Enclave."

The line began to quiver and sing. Looking back up, Glystra saw the freight carrier with Asa Elton, Motta and Wailie.

"We might as well start off," said Osrik. "Otherwise, the platform will be overcrowded."

They set off, close-hauled, sailing so near into the eye of the wind that the leach of the sail flapped constantly. The line ran from treetop to treetop, and sometimes black-green foliage brushed Glystra's feet . . . Osrik had doused his sail, was beckoning him urgently.

"What's the trouble?"

Silence, signaled Osrik. He pointed ahead. Glystra trundled his trolley forward, up against Osrik's. "What's wrong?"

Osrik was fixedly watching something on the ground, through a gap in the foliage. "This is a dangerous part of the line . . . Bands of soldiers, starving forest people, bandits . . . Sometimes they wait till a trolley is over a high space, then cut the line, killing the traveler. . . ."

Glystra saw movement through the leaves, a shifting of white and gray. Osrik climbed from the trolley into the branches of the tree, let himself cautiously down a few feet. Glystra watched him quietly. Behind him the quiver of the next trolley. Claude Glystra signaled it to a halt.

Osrik was motioning to him. Glystra left his trolley and climbed to the crotch where Osrik stood. Through a gap in

the leaves, he could see the floor of the forest. Behind a low orange bush crouched three youths. Bows and arrows ready, they watched the line like cats at a mousehole.

"Here's where they get their early training," whispered Osrik. "When they are older, they go to raiding the towns of the March and all the Galatudanian Valley." He quietly nocked a quarrel into his crossbow.

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill the biggest . . . I'll be saving the lives of many innocent people."

Glystra struck up his arm; the bolt shattered a branch over the head of the would-be assassins. Glystra saw their white faces; then they were off, scurrying like rabbits.

"Why did you do that?" asked Osrik heatedly. "Those same skulkers may murder me on my way back to Swamp City."

Glystra could find no words at first. Then he muttered, "Sorry . . . I suppose you're right. But if this were Earth, they'd be at college."

The monoline dropped down out of the forest, stretched across a river-valley, over a swift river which Osrik called the Thelma. They made a fifty-foot portage up the opposite bank, and set off once more across a land of peaceful farms and stone houses, undistinguished except for the fact that each house carried on its gable an intricate tangle of brambles and spiny leaves.

Glystra called to Osrik. "What on earth are those bristling thorn-patches?"

"Those are the ghost-catchers," said Osrik, easily. "This section of country abounds with ghosts; there's a ghost for every house, sometimes more; and since they always give a quick jump, which takes them to the roof where they can walk back and forth, the traps discourage them sadly . . ."

Glystra thought that no matter how ordinary and uneventful a Big Planet landscape might appear, it was still Big Planet.

The monoline paralleled a rutted earthen road; and three times the caravan, swinging along briskly with the breeze on the beam, passed big red farm-wains with six foot wooden wheels, squeaking and groaning like scalded pigs. They were loaded with red melon bulbs, bundles of orange vine, baskets of green okra. The lads who walked barefoot alongside goading the long-necked zipangotes wore tall conical hats with veils of white cloth about their faces.

"To fool the ghosts?" Glystra asked Osrik.

"To fool the ghosts."

Afternoon wore on; the country became verdant and the ground supported every kind of pleasant growth. The farming region fell behind; they seemed to be traversing a great parkland.

Osrik pointed ahead. "See there, that white aquafer? There is your first glimpse of Kirstendale, the finest city of the Galatudanian Valley. . . ."

## XI. *EVERY MAN A MILLIONAIRE!*

For several minutes, little enough of Kirstendale could be seen, splashes of white through the trees, a pair of stone causeways. The trolleys sailed across a pasture of red-green grass, the trees parted, and there was the city, rising from a grassy plain with blue mountains in the background.

It was the largest and most elaborate settlement the Earthmen had seen on Big Planet, but it was never a city which might have existed on Earth. It reminded Glystra of the cloud-borne castles in fairy-story illustrations.

The line took a sudden turn and they came upon a scene of gay activity, carnival color.

A game was in progress. On the field were fifty men and women in garments of remarkable complexity and elegance: silks, satins, velvets, coarse tasseled weaves—tucked, flared, gored, bedecked, beribboned covered with tinsel and lace.

The field was laid off into squares by lines of colored grasses cropped and tended with the nicest precision, and each player occupied a single square. Sheets of silk hung at each side from a row of moored balloons. Each sheet glowed a different color peach-tan, orange-russet, blue, sea-green, rippling, shining in the breeze. A myriad of small colored balls were in use, balls which half floated, almost as light as air.

The players caught balls in a manner which seemed to depend on the color of the ball, the color of the player's headribbon and the square where the player stood. Balls filled the air, little sunlit jewels, and sometimes a player would catch three balls at once and toss them away with great dexterity. When a ball landed in one of the silken curtains, a score was counted, to the great jubilation of certain players and spectators, who cried, "Ohé, ohé, ohé!"

Several hundred men and women watched the game from the sidelines. They were dressed in the same extravagant fashion, and in addition wore head gear of fantastic complexity, confections most ingeniously designed and assembled. One young man displayed a shell like an overturned boat, striped in bright green and scarlet. A young woman —very beautiful, Claude Glystra thought, supple as a kitten, with sleek yellow hair and long yellow eyes—wore a cloche-helmet of soft leather from which rose a tall antenna, and this antenna radiated prongs tipped with spangles of live fire—vermilion, scintillant green, molten gold . . . Another—another another: baroque, unique, incredible . . .

The monolith circled the field. The players and spectators glanced up casually, then returned to their game.

Glystra noticed an attendant rolling a cart arrayed with pastries. "Pianza—look what he's wearing . . ."

Eli Pianza snorted in surprise and amusement. "It's a tuxedo Dinner jacket. Black tie Stripe down the trousers, patent leather shoes. Wonderful."

Out on the field, a ball fell into the billowing russet-

gold curtain, rolled softly to the ground. There was joyous applause from the spectators.

Fayne yelled up from the rear, "Wonder how they'd take to football?"

Glystra's trolley coasted quietly along the line. The freight flat behind, with Pianza and Bishop, overtook him. Glystra spoke over his shoulder, "Steve, what does the Almanac say about Kirstendale?"

Bishop came up to stand at the forward end of the flat, under the lead wheel. "Seems as if there's a mystery of sorts —'the Kirstendale Paradox,' that's what they called it. It starts to come back to me. A syndicate of millionaires established the town to beat System taxes. A whole colony came out with their servants—twenty or thirty families. Apparently —well, there's the result."

The monoline veered once more, the breeze fell astern. Sails spread out like butterfly wings, the caravan plunged through an arch into the city, coasted up to a landing.

Three quiet men in dark livery came forward, wordlessly removed the packs from the trolleys and put them into carts with high spoked wheels. Glystra started to remonstrate, but catching Osrik's eye, desisted. "What's happening?"

"They assume that you are wealthy," said Osrik.

"Humph," grunted Glystra. "Am I supposed to tip them?"

"Do what?"

"Give them money."

Osrik blinked, still perplexed.

"Money. Metal."

"Ah, metall" Osrik twisted his natty mustache. "That is as you wish."

The head porter approached, a tall solemn-faced man with carefully shaved cheeks, long sideburns terminating in a little puff of black whiskers: a man comporting himself with immense dignity.

Glystra handed him three small iron washers. "For you and your men."

"Thank you, sir . . . And where will you have your luggage sent?"

"What are the choices?"

"Well, there's the Grand Savoyard and the Metropole and the Ritz-Carlton—all excellent, all equally expensive."

"How expensive?"

"Perhaps an ounce a week . . . The Traveler's Inn and the Fairmont are likewise expensive, but quieter."

"What is a good inn of moderate rates?"

"I recommend the Hunt Club. This way, sir, to the carriage."

He led them to a landau mounted on four elliptical springs of laminated golden wood. There were no zipangotes hitched to the front; in fact, the carriage appeared innocent of motive power.

The head porter swung open the door with a flourish. Fayne, in the lead, hesitated, looked back over his shoulder. "A joke? After we get in, do you walk away and leave us sitting here?"

"No indeed, sir, by no means."

Fayne gingerly climbed up the two steps, lowered himself into the soft seat. The rest of the party followed.

The head porter closed the door with exquisite finesse, signaled. Four men in tight black uniforms stepped forward. Each clipped a strap to the front of the carriage, tossed it over his shoulder, and the carriage was underway, over granite flags through the heart of the city.

Kurstendale was a city clean as new paper, bright with polished stone and glass, gay with flowers. Towers rose everywhere, each circled by a staircase which spiraled up to meet the onion-shaped bulb of the dwelling.

They approached a cylindrical building in the middle of the city, large as a gas storage tank. A lush growth of blue-green vine with maroon trumpet flowers, and rows of large windows, gave a sense of lightness and elegance to an otherwise heavy building.

The carriage passed under a marquee roofed with stained glass, and the Big Planet sunlight, passing through, puddled the flags with color. A sign on the marquee read, "Hotel Metropole."

"Hm," said Fayne, "it looks like a nice place . . . After the—well, inconvenience of the journey, I could stand a week or two in the lap of luxury."

But the carriage continued around the building, presently passed another marquee. This was draped in rich saffron satin, fringed with royal red tassels. A sign read "Grand Savoyard."

Next they passed a portico of somewhat classical dignity: columns, Ionic capitals and entablature. Chiseled letters read "Ritz-Carlton," and again Fayne looked wistfully over his shoulder as the carriage swept by. "We'll probably end up on the skid-road."

They passed a vaguely Oriental entrance: carved dark wood, a slab of the same wood supporting tall green urns. The sign read, "The Traveler's Inn."

The carriage continued another hundred feet and stopped under an awning of green, red and white striped canvas. A bold black and white sign announced "The Hunt Club."

A door man stepped forward, helped them to the pavement, then ran ahead to open the door.

The party of travelers passed through a short corridor pasted with green baize, decorated with black and white landscapes, and entered a large central lobby.

Directly opposite, across the lobby, a corridor led outside. Through the door shone the many-colored radiance of stained glass in the sunlight.

Claude Glystra looked around the walls. At intervals, other corridors led off like spokes from a hub, all evidently leading to the outside. Grinning, he turned to Pianza. "The Metropole, the Grand-Savoyard, the Ritz-Carlton, the Traveler's Inn, the Hunt Club—they're all the same."

Osrik made an urgent motion. "Quiet. This is very real to the Kirsters. You will offend them."

"But—"

Osrik said hurriedly, "I should have informed you; the entrance you chose places you on the social scale. The accommodations are identical, but it is considered smarter and more fashionable to enter through the Metropole."

Glystra nodded. "I understand completely. We'll be careful."

The doorman led them across the lobby to a circular desk with a polished wood counter. Rods wound with spirals of colored cloth rising from the edge of the counter supported a parasol shaped top. A central pier continued up three feet, then extended in a ten-foot pole of pitted black wood. Around the pole, veering in and out, flew ten thousand fireflies swooping, circling, settling on the pitted wood of the pole, flying out again in a swift current, ten, twenty, fifty feet from the pole.

The doorman took them to that section of the desk marked off by the Hunt Club colors. Glystra turned around and counted heads, like the father of a troublesome family. Fayne, ruddy and flushed, was talking to a tired Pranza; Elton and Bishop stood with Wailie and Motta, the girls excited, vastly impressed; Nancy stood pale and rather tense by his right elbow. Osrik at his left. Nine in all.

"Excuse me, sir," said the desk clerk. "Are you Mr. Claude Glystra, of Earth?"

Glystra swung around in surprise. "Why do you ask?"

"Sir Walden Marchion extends his compliments, and begs that you and your party honor him by residing at his villa the period of your stay. He has sent his carriage for your use, if you will so favor him."

Glystra turned to Osrik, and spoke in a cold voice. "How did this Sir Walden Marchion know of our arrival?"

Osrik said with immense dignity, "The head porter at the landing inquired your identity . . . I saw no reason to conceal it."

"News certainly travels fast in Kirstendale . . . What is your opinion in regard to the invitation?"

Osrik turned to the desk clerk. "Exactly who is Sir Walden Marchion?"

"One of the wealthiest and most influential men in Kirstendale. A very distinguished gentleman."

Osrik surveyed Glystra with a new appraisal. "I see no reason to decline."

Glystra said to the desk clerk, "We'll accept the invitation."

The desk clerk nodded. "I'm sure that you'll find your visit pleasant. Sir Walden has served meat at his table on several occasions The carriage is waiting. Ah, Manville, if you will " He signaled to the clerk at the Grand-Savoyard sector of the desk. This clerk nodded to a young man in a rich black livery with yellow piping down the sides, who clicked his heels, bowed, stalked out the Grand Savoyard entrance and a moment later reappeared in the Hunt Club corridor. He strode up to Glystra, clicked his heels, bowed.

"Sir Walden's carriage, sir."

"Thank you."

Careful not to commit the *faux pas* of leaving by the Traveler's Inn entrance, the party returned outside, climbed into a long, low brougham. The doorman closed the door, the carriage driver said, "Your luggage will be conveyed to Sir Walden's."

"Such courtesy," murmured Pianza. "Such unbelievable punctilio!"

Fayne sank back in the deep-cushioned seats with a sigh. "I'm afraid that all this feudalism finds a customer in me."

"I wonder," said Glystra, watching out the window, "what the desk clerk meant when he said that Sir Walden often served meat."

Osrik blew out his cheeks. "Easily explained. By a pec-

uliar freak, the Galatudanian Valley supports no animal life other than zipangotes, whose flesh is so rank as to be inedible. A parasitic insect deadly to creatures with fur, scales or floss is responsible. The zipangote, with his naked hide, is not troubled. The Kirsters, therefore, subsist on vegetable food, fruits, yeast fungus, an occasional water-creature, certain varieties of insect; on rare occasions meat is imported from Coelanvilli."

The carriage, drawn by five runners in Sir Walden's black livery, trundled across the pavement. They passed a row of shops. The first displayed delicate creations of gauze and puff, the second sold flagons carved of green chert and mottled blue soapstone. The next booth offered pompoms of twirled green and rose satin; the next was a jeweler's window, with trays full of glinting lights, next a display of glassware—goblets exceedingly tall and slender, with tiny cups and long stems, and the window glittered and glistened in vertical lines and diamond-colored striations

"I'm rather interested in the economy," said Fayne. "Somewhere these goods are fabricated. Where? By whom? Slaves? It takes lots of production to support this kind of a setup."

Claude Glystra scratched his head. "I don't see how they do it. They certainly can't be supplied from Earth. . . ."

"Evidently this is their secret," said Pianza. "The Kirstendale Paradox."

Fayne said with an air of finality, "Whatever it is, it seems to suit everybody; everybody seems happy."

"Everybody in sight," said Elton.

Wailie and Motta had been chattering—bright-eyed, excited. Glystra watched them a moment, wondering what was going on in their brains . . . They had filled out, their cheeks were no longer hollow, their hair was glossy and well-tended; they were pretty girls Elton and Bishop were modestly proud of them. Elton patted Motta's head. "See anything you'd like?"

"Oh, yes! Jewels and metal and lovely cloth, and ribbons and spangles and those lovely sandals. . . ."

Asa Elton winked at Bishop. "Clothes, clothes, clothes."

"*Le plus de la différence, le plus de la même chose,*" said Bishop.

The carriage turned among the towers—graceful spires swooping up to the onion-shaped dwellings.

The carriage halted by a pale green column; a servant swung wide the door. "The castle of Sir Walden Marchion . . ."

## XII. *KIRSTENDALE IDYLL*

THE PARTY ALIGHTED, the carriage swept off.

"This way if you please . . ."

They climbed the stairs, spiraling up to the beetling shape of Sir Walden's castle. Buttress vanes sprang out from the central column, elbowing up and out to the outer flange.

Elton felt one of the vanes—a parchment-tan material two inches thick. "Wood . . . Looks as if it grows right out of the trunk." He cocked his head up to where the floor swelled out in a smooth curve. "These things grew here! They're big plants!"

The servant looked back, his black brows in a disapproving line. "This is the castle of Sir Walden, his manse. . . ."

Elton winked at Glystra. "Guess I was wrong; it's not a big acorn after all."

"Certainly not," said the servant.

The stairway made one last swoop far out from the central column, apparently supported by its own structural strength; then the party stood on a wide plat, swept by the cool Big Planet breezes.

The servant flung open the door and stood aside. Sir Walden's guests entered the sky-castle.

They stood in a large room, light and airy, decorated with

an unobtrusive intricacy. The floor was not level, but flared like a trumpet bell. A pool of water, dyed bright blue, filled the depression in the center. Insects with white gauzy wings and feelers scuttled back and forth across the surface, trailing V-ripples which sparkled momentarily green.

"Be at your ease," said the servant. "Sir Walden is on his way to welcome you. Refreshing ichors are at your disposal, in three vintages: maychee, worm, vervaine; pray be so good as to enjoy them."

He bowed and withdrew. The travelers were alone.

Claude Glystra sighed heavily. "Looks like a nice place . . ."

Five minutes passed before Sir Walden appeared—a tall man, sober-faced, rather gravely handsome. He apologized for not being on hand to greet them, professing himself delayed beyond remedy elsewhere.

Glystra, when he found an opportunity, muttered aside to Pianza, "Where have we seen him before? Or have we?"

Pianza shook his head. "Nowhere to my knowledge . . ."

Two lads of fourteen and sixteen wearing pink, yellow and green, with curl-toed sandals of remarkable design, entered the room. They bowed. "At your service, friends from Mother Earth."

"My sons," said Sir Walden, "Thane and Halmon."

Glystra said, "We are delighted to enjoy the hospitality of your house, Sir Walden, but—bluntly may I inquire why it has been extended to us, complete strangers that we are?"

Sir Walden made an elegant gesture "Please . . . We will chat far and long—but now, you are weary and travel-worn. So you shall be refreshed." He clapped his hands. "Servants!"

A dozen men and women appeared. "Baths for our guests, scented with—" he kneaded his chin with his hand, as if the matter required the utmost nicety of judgment. He arrived at a decision. " with Nigali No. 29, that will be most suitable, and let there be new garments for their comfort."

Fayne sighed. "A bath . . . Hot water . . ."

"Thank you," said Glystra. Sir Walden's hospitality was still a mystery.

He was conveyed to a pleasant chamber high above the city. An expressionless young man in tight black livery took his clothes. "Your bath is through this door, Lord Glystra."

Glystra stepped into a small room with walls of seamless mother-of-pearl. Warm water rose up around his knees, his waist, his chest. Foam and bubbles surged up under his feet, rushed up past his tingling body, burst into his face with a pleasant sharp fragrance. Glystra sighed, relaxed; and fatigue was gone, leaving behind a pleasant soft weariness.

The water level dropped swiftly, warm air gushed around him. He pushed open the door.

The man had disappeared. A girl carrying a towel on two outstretched arms was there, smiling.

"I am your room-servant. However, if you prefer, I will go."

Glystra seized the towel, wrapped himself in it. "Give me my clothes."

With no change of expression, she brought him Kirstendale garments and assisted him into the intricate folds, tucks and drapes.

At last she pronounced him dressed. He wore a garment of green and blue, in which he felt awkward and ridiculous. The girl insisted that a man without head-ornament would be a spectacle for derision, so finally he allowed her to pull a loose black velvet beret over his cropped black poll. Before he could protest, she had fixed a string of scarlet beads so as to hang over one ear.

She stood back, admiring him. "Now my lord is a lord among lords . . . Such a presence . . ."

"I feel like a lord among jackasses," muttered Glystra.

He descended to the main hall. Sunset light poured in through the mullioned windows. A round table was spread

with heavy ivory cloth, and set with fourteen places.

The plates were marble, thin and fragile, apparently carved and worked by hand; the implements were carved from a hard black wood.

One by one, Glystra's companions arrived—the men sheepish in their new garments, the girls sparkling and radiant. Nancy wore pale green, pink and white. When she entered the room, Glystra hastily sought her eye. She looked away. Glystra clamped his mouth, scowled toward the blue pool in the center of the room.

Sir Walden appeared and with him his two sons, a daughter, and a tall woman in billows of lavender lace whom he introduced as his wife.

Dinner was a splendid event, course after course, dishes of unfamiliar, odd-tasting food, all elaborately prepared and served. The variety was such that it came as a slight shock when Glystra realized that the meal was entirely vegetarian.

After dinner there were oil-smooth liqueurs and much talk. Glystra, relaxed completely, leaned toward Sir Walden.

"Sir, you have not yet explained your interest in us casual passers-by."

Sir Walden made a delicate grimace. "Surely it is a trivial matter. Since I enjoy your company, and you must rest your heads somewhere—what is the difference?"

"It is a matter which disturbs me," protested Glystra. "Every human act is the result of some impulse; the nature of the impulse which caused you to send the messenger for us preys on my mind . . . I hope you will forgive my insistence. . . ."

Sir Walden smiled. "Some of us here in Kirstendale subscribe to the Doctrine of Illogical Substitution, which in many respects disputes your theory of causation. And then there is the Tempo-Fluxion Dogma, very interesting, although I for one cannot entirely accept the implications. Possibly the

central postulates are unknown on Earth? The advouters claim that as the river of time flows past and through us, our brains are disturbed—jostled, if you will—by irregularities, eddies, in the flow of the moments. They believe that if it were possible to control the turbulence in the river, it would be possible to manipulate creative ability in human minds. What do you say to that?"

"That I still wonder why you asked us to be your guests."

Sir Walden laughed helplessly. "Very well, you might as well learn the inconsequentiality of our lives here in Kirstendale." He leaned forward, as if resolved on candor. "We Kirsters love novelty—the new, the fresh, the exciting. You are Earthmen. No Earthmen have passed through Kirstendale for fifty years. Your presence in my house not only affords me the pleasure of new experience, but also adds to my prestige in the town . . . You see, I am perfectly frank, even to my disadvantage."

"I see," said Glystra. The explanation appeared reasonable.

"I was quick with my invitation. Undoubtedly you would have received a dozen others inside the hour. But I have connections with the depot agent."

Glystra tried to remember the head porter at the landing, who must have relayed the information almost instantly to Sir Walden.

The evening passed Glystra, head spinning from the wine, was conducted to his room.

The morning attendant was a thin-faced young man, who dressed Glystra, after his morning bath, in silence.

Glystra hurried to the main hall, anxious to find Nancy, but she was not yet in evidence. Pianza and Elton sat alone at the table, eating pink melon.

Glystra muttered a greeting and sat down. A moment later Nancy entered the room, fresh, blue-eyed, more beautiful than Glystra had ever remembered her. During breakfast, he tried to fathom her mind. She was pleasant, detached, cool.

One by one, the party entered the hall, until at last everyone was present. Except—

"Where's Roger?" asked Pianza. "Doesn't he plan to get up?" He turned to a servant. "Will you please arouse Mr. Fayne?"

The servant returned. "Mr. Fayne is not in his room."

Fayne was not seen all day.

It was possible, said Sir Walden, that Fayne had wished to explore the town on foot. Glystra, with no other hypothesis to offer, concurred politely. If Fayne had indeed wandered off, he would return when he felt so inclined. If he had been taken against his will, Claude Glystra was unable to formulate a plan to retrieve him. It might be wise, thought Glystra, to leave Kirstendale as soon as possible. He said as much at lunch.

Wailie and Motta were downcast. "Best we should remain here in Kirstendale," said Wailie. "Everyone is gay; there is no beating of the woman, and a great deal of food."

"Of course there is no meat," Motta pointed out, "but who cares? The fabrics and the perfumed water and—" She glanced at Wailie and giggled. They looked at Elton and Bishop, and giggled again.

Steve Bishop blushed, sipped green fruit juice. Elton raised his eyebrows sardonically.

Sir Walden said gravely, "I have a rather pleasant surprise for you. Tonight, at our evening meal, there will be meat—a dish prepared in honor of our guests."

He looked from face to face, half-smiling, waiting for the expected enthusiasm. Then: "But perhaps for you, meat is not the gala event it is for us . . . Also, I have been asked to convey the invitation of my Lord Sir Clarence Attlewee to a soiree at his castle this evening. It has likewise been planned in your honor, and he hopes you will accept."

"Thank you," said Glystra. "Speaking for myself, I'll be

delighted." He looked around the circle of faces. "I think we'll all be there . . . Even Fayne, if he shows up."

During the afternoon, Sir Walden took them to what he called a "pressing." It proved to be a ceremonial squeezing of essence from a vat of flower petals. Two hundred of the aristocrats appeared, wearing green and gray headgear, which Sir Walden described as traditional for the occasion.

The booms which radiated like spokes from the press were bedecked like a maypole, and manned by children. Round and round, chanting a shrill song round and round. Flower fumes rose into the air, and a trickle of yellow green syrup dripped from the spout. Round and round. Essence of white blossoms, lush yellow petals, blue flake-flowers . . . The children bore tiny cups through the crowd, each containing a few drops of essence. Sir Walden said, "Bring your tongue almost to the liquid, but do not quite taste it."

Glystra bent his head and followed the instructions. A wave of pungent fragrance swept through his throat, his nose, his entire head. His eyes swam, his head reeled, momentarily dizzy in a kind of floral ecstasy.

"Exquisite," he gasped when he was able to speak.

Sir Walden nodded. "That was the Baie-Jolie press. Next will be a heavy Purple Woodmint, then a Marine Garden, then a Rose Thyme, and last my favorite, the fascinating Meadow Harvest Sachet."

## XIII. *THE SECRET*

THROUGH THE afternoon the travelers reveled in perfume, and at last, half intoxicated from gorgeous odors, they returned to Sir Walden's castle.

Inquiry revealed that Roger Fayne had not yet returned.

Sir Walden was more attentive and gracious than ever this evening; repeatedly he toasted his guests and the planet Earth in wines first green, then orange, then red,

and Glystra's head was light before the first series of courses was served.

Course after course: hot pickled fruit, slabs of nutty yeast spread with sweet syrups, salads, croquettes garnished with crisp water-weed and presently a great tureen was wheeled in, a pottery bowl glazed in stripes of brown, black and green.

Sir Walden himself served the meat—slices of pale roast swimming in rich brown gravy.

Glystra found himself replete, without further appetite, and merely toyed with his portion. "What kind of animal furnishes the meat?"

Sir Walden looked up, wiped his lips with a napkin. "A rather large beast, seldom seen in these parts. It seems to have wandered down from the north woods; by rare luck we procured it; its meat is superlatively delicious."

"Indeed," said Glystra. Looking about, he noticed that Elton and Osrik still had appetite, and ate the meat with relish, as did Nancy and the gypsy girls.

At the final course—a rich cheeselike substance— Glystra said suddenly, "I think, Sir Walden, that tomorrow we will take our leave of Kirstendale."

"What? So soon?"

"We have far to go, and the monobne goes but a short distance along the way."

"But—your friend Fayne?"

"If he is found—" He paused. "If he returns, he possibly may be able to overtake us. I feel that we had better go before—ah, any of us wander away."

"You're spoiling us for the tough life we have ahead," said Pranza. "Another week here and I couldn't bring myself to leave."

Sir Walden expressed his regret. "I invited you as curiosities of the moment; now I look upon you as my friends."

A coach came to convey the party to Sir Clarence Attlewee's soiree. Sir Walden stood back.

"But do you not come with us?"

"No," said Sir Walden. "I will be occupied this evening."

Claude Glystra slowly took his seat in the carriage. Automatically he felt to his side but he had left his weapon in his room. He whispered to Elton, "Tonight—don't drink too much. I think that we had better keep our heads clear . . . For what—I don't know."

"Right."

The carriage stopped by a column painted blue and white, and the party was conducted up a spiral staircase much like Sir Walden Marchion's.

Sir Clarence, a man with a heavy chin and snapping eyes, greeted his guests at the head of the stairs. Glystra stared at him. Somewhere, somehow, Sir Clarence's face was familiar to him. He stammered, "Haven't we met, Sir Clarence? This afternoon at the pressing?"

"I think not," said Sir Clarence. "I was otherwise occupied today." He conducted them into his home. "Allow me to present my wife And Valery, my daughter . . ."

Glystra's mouth fell open. Here was the girl who had waited to serve him when he left his bath. Glystra mumbled, "Charmed to make your acquaintance," and she moved away.

Watching her, in her complicated wrappings of silk and toile and net, Claude Glystra was certain that she was the same girl.

Bishop nudged him. "There's something rather peculiar—"

"What?"

"Our host Sir Clarence—I've seen him before."

"So have I."

Steve Bishop snapped his fingers. "That's it."

"Who is he?"

"Sir Clarence is or was the doorman at the Hunt Club."

Glystra stared, first at Bishop, then at Sir Clarence, who now was speaking with Nancy. Bishop was right.

Behind him, he heard a booming laugh, a great roar of merriment. "Haw, haw, haw! Look at that!"

It was Elton's laugh, and Elton laughed only rarely.

Glystra whirled about. He was face to face with Roger Fayne.

Fayne wore a black livery, with tiny gold epaulettes. He pushed a cart laden with canapés.

Glystra broke into laughter, as did Bishop and Pianza. Fayne blushed, a tide of red rising up his bull neck, over his cheeks. He darted an appealing glance toward Sir Clarence, who watched him impassively.

"Well, Fayne," said Glystra, "suppose you let us in on it . . . Picking up a little spare change during your stay?"

"Care for hors d'oeuvres, sir?" asked Fayne tonelessly.

"No, damn it. No hors d'oeuvres. Just an explanation."

"Thank you, sir," said Fayne, and rolled his cart away.

Glystra wheeled and strode after Fayne, who seemed intent on rolling his cart out of the room. "Roger! We're going to thrash this thing out right here."

"Quiet!" whispered Fayne. "It's not polite to create such a disturbance."

"Thank God I'm not an aristocrat then."

"But I am—and you're hurting my prestige!"

Glystra blinked. "You? An aristocrat? You're just a flunky pushing around a tray of sandwiches."

"Everybody's the same way," said Fayne. "Everybody is everybody else's servant. How do you suppose they keep up the front?"

Glystra sat down. "But—"

Fayne said savagely, "I decided I liked it here. I want to stay. I've had enough of tramping across forty thousand miles of jungle, getting killed. I asked Sir Walden if I could stay. He said yes, but he told me I'd have to work like everybody else, and work hard. There's not a more industrious people in space than the Kirsters. They know what they want, and they work for it. Every hour of swanking around as an aristocrat they put in two working in the shops, the factories, in the homes. Usually all three. Instead of living

one life, they live two or three. They love it, thrive on it. I like it, too. Call me a snob," he shouted, his voice rising angrily. "I admit it. But while you and the others are out in the muck, I'll be living here like a king!"

"That's all right, Roger," said Glystra mildly. "Or perhaps I should say, Sir Roger. Why couldn't you tell me of your plans?"

Fayne turned away. "I thought you'd try to argue with me."

"Not at all," said Glystra. "You're a free agent." He turned away. "I wish you luck." He returned to the main hall.

Early the next morning a carriage called at the castle of Sir Walden Marchion. Scrutinizing the men who pulled the carriage, Glystra recognized one of Sir Clarence's sons.

Wailie and Motta were missing. Glystra asked Bishop, "Where's your servant?"

Steve Bishop shook his head.

"Did she know we were leaving?"

"Well—yes."

Glystra turned to Elton. "How about Motta?"

Asa Elton looked at Bishop. "Let's face it." He grinned. "We can't compete with Kirstendale."

Glystra turned back to Elton and Bishop. "Do you want to look for them?"

Elton shook his head. "They're better off here."

"Let's go," said Bishop.

At the monoline station, the head porter reached into the carriage, unloaded the packs to a cart, wheeled them to the trolleys.

Claude Glystra winked at his fellows. The porter was Sir Walden Marchion.

With a straight face, Glystra tipped him again, three small iron washers.

Sir Walden bowed low. "Thank you very much, sir."

Kirstendale dwindled in the west. As before Osrik rode

in the lead, with Glystra following. Then came the first freight carrier with Elton and Nancy, then the second with Bishop and Pianza. Fayne's trolley had been left behind at Kirstendale.

The party was dwindling. Glystra thought back across the last few weeks. Ketch, Darrot, Vallusser—killed. Fayne had abandoned the trek. Abbigens, Morwatz, the fifty Beaujolain soldiers—all dead or enslaved. Atman, the Politboros, the Magickers in the griamobot—killed. Who would be next?

The thought hung in his mind like a cloud, while they sailed along the bank of a quiet river—the east fork of the Thelma. The countryside was clumped with Earth-type oaks, cypress, elm and hemlock, imported with the first settlers and now well-adapted. Big Planet flora included bell-briar, mutus weed, handkerchief trees, with flowers like strips of rag, bronzenbush, wire-aspen, a hundred nameless varieties of low-jointed furze. Truck farms and paddies occupied the river meadows.

The river presently bore to the north. The monoline continued east, and the country changed. The green meadows and forest became a dark blur to the left and behind; ahead was dry savannah and a range of blue hills in the far Big Planet distance. Osrik pointed. "The Eyrie."

At noon on the third day Osrik pointed ahead once more. "We're coming to Lake Pellitante."

The ground became marshy, and presently the monoline swung to the south. For half an hour they crossed dunes sparsely overgrown with dry yellow grass; and the glare off the white sands, combined with the normal brilliance of the sunlight, made vision painful.

A high dune passed below, the dry grass licking up at the trolleys like spume at the crest of a wave, and they coasted down toward a lagoon choked with brilliant yellow reeds.

Osrik, riding fifty yards ahead, suddenly dropped from sight. The yellow reeds boiled with life; naked men, thin

and tall as giraffes, painted in vertical yellow and black stripes, sprang forth. They were immensely tall -eight feet or more—and they came in great bounds. A sharp cry like a bugle call sounded, the men stopped short, stiffened back to heave spears . . . Violet light fanned out, cracking with white sparks. The tall men fell like rags. Three had not been killed, but lay thrashing their long arms and legs like upturned insects.

Osrik picked himself up from the ground, stalked across the marsh, stabbed them with their own spears.

The swamp was quiet. Claude Glystra looked at the power-bank of his ion-shine, shook his head. "Done for." He started to toss it to the ground, then remembered the value of metal and tucked it under the seat.

Osrik returned to his trolley, still muttering and bristling. "The plague-taken reed-demons, they cut the line!" Evidently, in Osrik's register of evils, this was the most depraved crime of all.

"What race are these people?" asked Bishop, who had clambered down one of the line standards.

Osrik shrugged, and said in a disinterested tone, "They call themselves the Stanezi . . . They're a great nuisance to travelers."

Bishop nudged one of the scrawny forms over on its back, peered into the open mouth. "Filed teeth. Hamitic physiognomy . . . A Shilluk tribe emigrated to Big Planet from the Sudan about four hundred years ago an irredentist group who chose exile rather than submission to World Government. Very possibly here are their descendants."

From the toolbox in his trolley Osrik brought a block and tackle, and under his direction the broken parts of the monoline were heaved together. Sitting on top of one of the standards, Osrik was able to sink barbed splints into both ends and secure the splice with three whippings of fine cord. Then the tackle was released and the monoline was once more whole.

Osrik's trolley was hoisted back up into position; he set his sails and the caravan was once more under way.

As they rounded the elbow of the lagoon Glystra looked back and saw crouching forms steal from the swamp toward the yellow and black-striped bodies . . . *What a tragedy,* thought Glystra. *In ten seconds, the flower of the tribe wiped out.*

The monoline took a long gradual slant up into a line of trees bordering Lake Pellitante, and the sudden shade was like darkness. The wind was light, blowing in vagrant puffs, and the trolleys coasted hardly faster than a man could walk. The lake lay nearly mirror-calm, with a peculiar yellow-gray glisten on the surface, like a film of spiderweb. The opposite shore was lost in the haze; far out, three or four boats were visible, manned, according to Osrik, by fishermen of a tribe who held the land in superstitious dread, and never in the course of their lives set foot ashore.

Late afternoon found the party still drifting through the trees of the lake-shore, and at dusk a party of traders appeared, riding the monoline from the opposite direction.

Osrik halted his trolley, the lead man in the opposite caravan trundled closer, and the two exchanged greetings.

The traders were men of Miramar, in Coelanvilli, to the south of Kirstendale, returning from Myrtlesee Fountain. They were bright-eyed, wiry men in white linen suits, wearing red kerchiefs around their heads, which detail of dress invested them with a peculiarly piratical air. Osrik, however, appeared to be at his ease and Glystra gradually relaxed.

The trade caravan consisted of fourteen freight trolleys loaded with crystallized sugar. By an established rule, the Earthmen, with only four trolleys, were obligated to drop to the ground and allow the traders free way.

Evening had seeped lavender-gray across the lake, and Glystra decided to camp for the night. The leader of the traders likewise decided to make night camp.

"These are sad times," he said. "Every hand is turned against the trader, and it is wise to band together as many honest arms as possible."

## XIV. *TREACHERY*

It was still too early for sleep. The traders sat by the fire, busy with a game involving a rotating cage full of colored insects. Nancy sat cross-legged, her dark-fringed eyes wide, the pupils big and black. Eli Pianza sat on a log, paring his fingernails; Steve Bishop was frowning over a small notebook. Elton leaned back against a tree, his spare body relaxed, his eyes alert, watchful. Osrik greased the bearings of the trolleys, humming through his teeth.

Glystra walked down to the shore, to watch evening settle over the lake. The west was orange, green and gray; the east was washed in tenderest mauve. The wind had died completely. The lake lay flat, with a surface rich as milk.

Nancy drifted down from among the trees, her hair a mist of pale gold. She came close beside him. "Why did you come out here?"

"Just wandering . . . Thinking . . ."

"Are you sorry you left Kirstendale?"

He was surprised at the tone of wistful reproach. "No, of course not."

"You have been avoiding me," she said simply.

Claude Glystra had the uncomfortable feeling that he was about to be put on the defensive "No, not at all."

"Perhaps you found the Kirstendale women more desirable than me?" Again the tone of sad accusation

Glystra laughed. "I hardly spoke to them . . . How did you find the Kirstendale men?"

She came close to him. "How could I think of anyone other than you? My mind was full of jealousy. . . ."

The weight lifted from Glystra's mind, the pressure eased

from his throat. He settled upon a log, pulled her down beside him. "After Myrtlesee there's no more monoline."

"No."

"I've been considering going back to Kirstendale—"

He felt her stiffen, turn her head.

" and there build a sail plane large enough to carry all of us. And then I remember that we can't stay aloft indefinitely; that without proper power to keep us going, we might as well stay on the ground . . . And then I consider fantastic notions: rockets, kites—"

She caressed his face. "You worry too much, Claude."

"One scheme might work—a balloon. A hot air balloon. Unfortunately, the trend of the wind is southeast, and we would very soon be blown out to sea." He heaved a deep sigh.

Nancy pulled him to his feet. "Let's walk up the shore, where we're farther away from the camp. . . ."

When they returned, the traders had brought out a big green bottle of wine, and all were sitting around the fire, flushed and talkative. Glystra and Nancy each drank a small quantity.

Brilliant sunlight flooded the camp. Glystra struggled awake. Why did his mouth taste so vilely? Why had not the last sentry aroused him?

He stared around the camp.

The traders were gone!

Glystra jumped to his feet. Under the monoline lay Eli Pianza, face down—

The trolleys were gone. Four trolleys, a hundred pounds of metal, clothes, tools. . . .

And Eli was dead . . .

They buried him in a shallow grave in utter silence. Glystra looked up and down the monoline, turned back to his company. "There's no use fooling ourselves. This is a real blow."

Osrik said sheepishly, "The wine—we should never have

drunk the wine. They rubbed the inside of our glasses with sleep oil. One should never trust traders."

Glystra shook his head glumly, looked toward Eli Pianza's grave. A fine fellow, kind, unassuming, co-operative. . . . He turned back to the silent group.

"Osrik, there's no reason for you to come any farther. The trolleys are gone, our metal is gone. There's nothing for you ahead. You'd best get back to Kirstendale and pick up Fayne's trolley; that should get you back to Swamp City."

There would be Asa Elton, Steve Bishop, Nancy and himself left in the party. "Any of you others can do likewise. There's hardship and death ahead of us. Anyone who wants to return to Kirstendale my good wishes go with him."

Nancy said, "Why won't you turn back, Claude? There'll be all our life ahead of us -sooner or later, we can get a message to the Enclave."

"No. I'm going on."

"I'll stick," said Bishop.

"I don't like Kirstendale," said Elton. "They work too hard."

Nancy's shoulders drooped.

"You can go back with Osrik," suggested Glystra.

She looked up at him sorrowfully. "Do you want me to?"

"I never wanted you to come in the first place."

She tossed her head. "I'm not going back now."

Osrik rose to his feet, twisted his blond mustache. He bowed politely. "I wish you all the best of luck. You'd be wiser to return to Swamp City with me. Wittelhatch is not the worst master in the world." He looked from face to face. "No?"

"May you reach your destination."

Glystra watched him as he walked through the trees. His arms swung free. He had left his crossbow on the trolley; the trolley was gone.

"Just a minute," called Glystra.

Osrik turned. Glystra gave him the heat-gun. "Throw off

the safety here, press this button. There's very little power left in the Lank, so don't fire unless absolutely necessary."

"Thank you," said Osrik. "Thank you very much."

"Goodbye."

They watched him disappear through the trees.

Claude Glystra sighed. "The two or three charges in that gun might have taken us a few extra miles, or killed a few more Rebbirs. It'll save his Life . . . Well, let's take an inventory. What's left to us?"

"The commissary packs, with the concentrated foods, my vitamins, our blankets, the water-maker and four ion-shines," said Bishop.

"Makes for easier walking," said Elton.

The lake was forty miles wide—two days' march under the quiet trees. On the evening of the second day, a river outflowing from the Lake toward the south barred the way, and camp was made on the shore.

Next morning a raft was contrived by cross-piling dead branches. By dint of furious poling and paddling, the clumsy construction was forced to the opposite bank, three miles downstream from the monoline.

Climbing up on the bank, they looked across the landscape. Looming in the northeast were the crags of the Eyrie, guarded by a wall of great cliffs running north to south.

"Looks like about another three days to the cliffs," said Bishop, "and no perceptible gap for the monoline."

"Perhaps it's just as well we're on foot," said Elton. "Imagine the portage to the top of the cliff!"

Claude Glystra turned his head, looked along the river bank toward the lake, looked again, squinted. He pointed. "What do you see up there?"

"About a dozen men on zipangotes," said Elton.

"The traders spoke of a party of Rebbirs . . . Conceivably—" He nodded.

Nancy sighed. "How nice to ride on those beasts, instead of walking!"

"The same thought had occurred to me," said Glystra.

Bishop said dolefully, "Three months ago I was a civilized human being. I never thought I'd become a horse-thief."

Glystra grinned. "Makes it less astonishing when you remember that five or six hundred years ago the Rebbirs were civilized Earthmen."

"Well," said Elton, "what do we do? Walk down and kill them?"

"If they'll wait for us," said Glystra. "I hope we can do it on less than a macro-watt, because"—he scrutinized the indicator on the ion-shine he had claimed from Pianza's body -"there's only two macro watts left in the bank."

"About the same here," said Bishop.

"I've got about two good kicks in mine," said Elton.

"If they ride off peaceably," said Glystra, "we'll know they're good citizens and their lives won't be on our consciences. But if—"

"They've seen us!" cried Nancy. "They're coming!"

It was a race across the stretch of gray plain—men in flapping black cloaks were crouched on the thundering zipangotes. These were a species different from the string of beasts the Earthmen had sold to Wittelhatch; they were larger, heavier, and their heads were bony and white, like skulls.

"Demons!" muttered Nancy.

"Up here, up on the bank," said Glystra. "We want to delay the front ones till they're all within range . . ."

The horny feet thudded furiously across the plain, the Rebbirs sang out calls of the wildest exultation. The faces of the foremost were clear: bony, aquiline visages, jut-nosed, the lips drawn back in strain.

"I count thirteen," said Glystra. "Bishop, take four on the left; Elton, four on the right; I'll get five from the middle."

The riders deployed in a near-perfect line in front of the outcrop where the four stood. Three flickers of violet, a crackling of power. Thirteen Rebbirs lay on the ground.

A few minutes later, the party set off across the plain toward the line of cliffs. They rode the four strongest zipangotes; the others had been set free. The Rebbir swords, knives and metal were secure behind their saddles. They wore black cloaks and white helmets.

Nancy found little pleasure in the disguise. "The Rebbirs smell like goats." She made a wry face. "This cloak is abominable. And the helmet is greasy inside."

"Wipe it out," advised Glystra. "If it gets us to Myrtlesee, it's served its purpose . . ."

The land, rising in a long slope, became rocky and barren. On the morning of the second day, a caravan of six freight carriers appeared in the distance ahead, sailing swiftly down the wind. From a covert fifty yards off the trail the four travelers wtached the caravan whirl past—six swift shapes swinging to the press of white cloth—then they were gone downwind, and soon out of sight toward Lake Pellitante.

On the third day, the escarpment loomed big ahead. The monoline rose in a tremendous swoop, up toward the lip of the cliff.

"That's the way you come down from Myrtlesee," said Glystra. He turned his head, followed the hang of the cable across the sky, up, up, and along, till it disappeared against the chalky front of the cliff. "Going up wouldn't be so easy. That's a long portage. But down . . . Remember the ride down into the Galatudanian Valley?"

Nancy shivered. "This would be worse . . ."

They came to the landing at the end of the monoline, where the portage must start. The trail led off to the left, slanting up over the basal detritus of crumbled boulders. Then it cut back, into a way dug out of the very side of the cliff and curbed with cemented masonry. Two hundred yards in one

direction, then back, traversing right, left, right, left—and the shoulders of the zipangotes rubbed the inner wall, so that it was necessary to sit with the inside leg looped over the pommel of the saddle. The zipangotes swept up the trail, gliding on six legs with no suggestion of effort.

Up, up, back, forth. The face of Big Planet dropped below, spreading wider and wider, and where an Earthly eye might expect a horizon, with a division into land and sky, there was only land, and then still more land. Lake Pellitante glanced and gleamed in the distance.

Up, up. Wind drove a scud of clouds at the cliff; suddenly the trail was cloaked in damp gray twilight, and the wind swept up the mountain with the sound of a roaring torrent.

They halted near the edge of the cliff, with the wind pressing up over the rim. The plateau was bare limestone, scoured and free of dust. Gray-white, featureless, it stretched twenty miles, flat as a sheet of cardboard; then it became mottled, a region of gray shadows. The intervening area was empty except for the monoline: the standards at fifty foot intervals and the cable dwindling to nothing like an exercise in perspective.

"Well," said Glystra, "nothing in sight, so—"

"Look," said Elton. He pointed north, along the rim of the cliff.

Claude Glystra slumped back into the saddle. "Rebbirs."

They came along the verge like a column of ants, still several miles distant. Glystra estimated their number at two hundred. In a thick voice he said, "We'd better get moving . . . If we ride along the monoline—not too fast—perhaps they won't bother us. . . ."

"Let's go!" said Elton.

At a careless lope the caravan started east, down the copybook perspective of the monoline. Glystra kept an anxious watch on the company to the north. "They don't seem to be following—"

"They're coming now," said Elton.

A dozen of the cavalry spurted forward out of the ranks, evidently bent on interception.

Glystra clenched his teeth. "We've got to run for it."

He dug his knees into the side of the zipangote. It moaned and mumbled and flung itself ahead, bony face straining against the wind.

Twenty-four heavy feet pounded back the limestone. And behind came the Rebbirs, black cloaks flapping.

## XV. *THE REBBIRS*

NIGHTMARE FLIGHT, thought Claude Glystra; was he asleep? Nightmare steeds, nightmare riders, the gray-white flat given depth only by the diminishing monoline.

He broke free of the sensation, cast it away. Turning, he watched the Rebbirs over his shoulder. The whole army had streamed out, as if stimulated by the excitement of the chase. The first dozen had not gained appreciably; Glystra stroked the horny hide of his mount with an emotion almost like affection. "Go to it, boy . . ."

Miles, changeless miles: flat gray plains, thunder of pounding feet. Looking ahead, Glystra saw that they were near the region of mottled shadows—dunes of sand, white as salt, crystalline and bright as broken glass.

The Rebbirs had drawn closer. Looking behind, Glystra saw a sight which might have been beautiful in other, less personal, circumstances. The Rebbirs in the van had risen to their feet, standing in wonderful balance on the backs of their plunging mounts. And each, throwing back his cloak, fitted an arrow to a heavy black bow.

Glystra yelled, "Duck! They're shooting at us!" And he crouched over the side of his beast.

*Thwinggg!* The shaft sang over his head. The dunes towered above. Glystra felt the feet of his mount sound with a softer thud, a scuffing, and they were coursing across

white sand . . . The creature was laboring, breath was seizing in its throat. Very few miles left in the clogged muscles, then they would be at bay, the four of them.

Over the dunes, down the soft round valleys, up to the milk-white crests. Then looking back to view the surge of black-cloaked riders pouring across the swells, like black surf.

The dunes ended, washed against black obsidian hills. Behind, the rumble of multitudinous feet, hoarse war calls . . . Out of the dunes, into an old watercourse through the flint, where possibly once or twice yearly water foamed. The zipangotes stumbled over chunks of fractured black volcanic glass with sagging necks, bent legs.

To either side, gullies draining the side areas opened. Glystra swerved to the left. "In here!" He was panting, in sympathy with the gasps of the zipangote. "Quick! If we can lose them, we've got a chance . . ."

He plunged into the gully; behind came Nancy, pale, white around the mouth, then Bishop, then Elton.

"Quiet," said Glystra. "Back into the shadows—"

Thudding sounded out in the main watercourse. Black things hurled past the opening. War-calls sounded, now loud, now dim.

There was a sudden slackening to the sounds, an ominous change of pitch. Calls vibrated back and forth questing tones, answers. Glystra turned, looked behind. The ravine sloped at a near-impossible angle up to a ridge.

Glystra beckoned to Nancy. "Start up the hill." To Bishop and Elton: "After her."

Nancy kneed her mount. It moved, mumbled, stopped short at the slope, lowered its skull, tried to turn.

Nancy hauled the reins, kneed the beast desperately. Coughing and whimpering, it set its first pair of feet above its head on the slope, scrambled up.

"Quick!" said Glystra in a harsh whisper. "They'll be here any minute!"

Bishop and Elton followed . . . The yelling sounded closer. Glystra kneed his mount up the slope. Behind came the Rebbir, leaning forward with his sword outstretched, waving it like an eager antenna.

The gully was choked with hot-eyed men and their horny black beasts. The steep slope was a mass of clawing legs, hulking shoulders.

Nancy breasted over the ridge, then Bishop, then Elton, then Glystra.

Elton knew what to do. He laughed, his white teeth shining. His ion-shine was ready. He aimed it at the first Rebbir zipangote, squeezed. The white skullhead shattered into a scarlet crush. The beast threw up its front legs like a praying mantis, poised briefly, then fell into the beasts behind.

Glystra whirled his mount, led the way along the ridge. They rode with all the speed left to their beasts, threading the line of the ridge past the incursions of gullies, ravines, gulches. Caves and blowholes opened under their feet.

After five minutes, Glystra turned down one of the gullies, halted behind a heavy wall of vitreous slag.

"They'll be a long time finding us now, if they even bother to look . . . We'll be safe until dark, at any rate."

He looked down at the heaving shoulders of his mount. "You're not much of a looker—but you've been a friend . . ."

After nightfall, they returned to the ridge and stole eastward through the dark. The ridge broadened and flattened, the flint crumbled into rotten gray rock, disappeared under a dim ocean of sand.

As they started across the flat, from far behind came a call, an eerie hooting. Glystra halted his zipangote, listened. Silence everywhere.

The zipangote shuffled its feet, snorted softly. The distant call came once more. Glystra shifted in his saddle, kneed the zipangote into motion. "We'd better put distance between

us and the Rebbirs while it's still dark. Or at least until we find concealment of some sort."

They set off quietly across the glimmering sand. Claude Glystra watched over his shoulder. A spatter of meteorites scratched bright lines down the sky. From far back came the mournful call once more.

Big Planet rolled on through space, twisting its shoulder back toward Phaedra. Dawn came, a pink and orange explosion. By this time the zipangotes were barely able to stumble and their heads swung on long necks, sometimes striking the ground.

The light grew stronger. A silhouette, low in the east, appeared vegetation, waving fronds, bearded stalks, tendrils trailing from splayed branches.

Phaedra burst up into the sky. Plain to be seen now was an island of vegetation ten miles long in a white sea. From the center rose a hemispherical dome, glistening as of pale metal.

"That must be Myrtlesee," said Glystra. "Myrtlesee Fountain."

There was no area of transition. Desert became oasis as sharply as if a knife had trimmed away any extraneous straggles of herbage. Blue moss grew fresh and damp; an inch away the clay lay as dry and arid as any twenty miles to the west.

Passing into the cool gloom was like entering the Garden of Paradise. Glystra slid off his mount, tied the reins to a root, helped Nancy to the ground. Her face was pinched and white; Bishop's long countenance was loose and waxy; Elton's eyes gleamed like moonstones and his mouth was pulled into a thin pale line.

The zipangotes nosed and snuffled in the moss, lay down, rolled over. Glystra ran to remove the packs before they should be crushed.

Nancy lay at full length in the shade, Steve Bishop slumped beside her.

"Hungry?" asked Glystra.

Nancy shook her head. "Just tired. It's so peaceful here. And quiet . . . listen! Isn't that a bird singing?"

Glystra listened, and said, "It sounds very much like a bird."

Asa Elton opened the commissary pack, mixed vitamin concentrate with food powder, moistened it, stirred it into a heavy paste, scraped it into Fayne's cooker, squeezed down the lid, waited an instant, lifted the lid and withdrew a cake of hot pastry.

Claude Glystra lay down on the moss. "Let's hold a council of war."

Elton asked, "What's the problem?"

Glystra looked up into the blue-green foliage, tracing the white veins of a leaf. "Survival . . . There were eight of us that left Jubilith, not counting Nancy. You, Bishop, me, Pianza, Ketch, Darrot, Fayne and Vallusser. Nancy makes nine. We've come a thousand miles and there's only four of us left. Ahead of us is first of all more desert, the main part of the Palari. Then mountains, then the lake and the Monchevior River, then Lord knows what-all."

"Trying to scare us?"

Glystra continued as if he hadn't heard, "When we left Jubilith, I thought the chances were pretty good that we'd all make it. Footsore, bedraggled—but alive. I was wrong. So—now's the time. Anyone who wants to return to Kirstendale on the monoline has my blessing. There's metal enough in those Rebbir swords to make us all rich men. If any of you feel that you'd rather be a live Kirster than a dead Earthman -now's the chance to make up your minds, and no hard feelings."

He waited. No one spoke.

Glystra still looked up into the leaves. "We'll rest here

in Myrtlesee a day or so, and then—whoever wants to start east . . ."

He walked softly across the moss, looked down at his companions. Bishop snored; Elton slept like an innocent child; Nancy's hands trembled, quivered as if in a nightmare. He thought, *The traders killed Pianza, the man on watch. Why did they stop?* It would have been perfectly safe to kill the entire party, and the traders apparently lacked qualms of any sort. The Earthmen wore valuable clothes, with many metal accessories. The ion-shines alone represented fortune beyond dreams. Why had not the entire party been slaughtered in their sleep? Was it that the traders had been prevented by someone who carried enough authority, perhaps in the shape of an ion-shine, to enforce his decisions?

Glystra turned away, the ache of grief and uncertainty in his throat. He walked back into the grove. The moss was like a deep rug of marvelous softness. The air was murmurous, restful. Big Planet sunlight trickled through layers of leaves and open spaces, fell around him with the richness of light in a fairy-tale forest. Through the air came a sweet trilling, soft, flutelike. The song of a bird—no, probably an insect or a lizard; there were no birds on Big Planet. And from the direction of the dome he heard the mellow chime of a gong.

There was a soft sound beside him. He jerked around. It was Nancy. He sighed in relief. "You frightened me."

"Claude," she whispered, "let's go back—all of us" She went on breathlessly, "I have no right to talk this way, I'm an uninvited guest . . . But—you'll surely die, I don't want you to die . . . Why can't we live, you and I? If we returned to Kirstendale—we could live out our lives in quiet."

He shook his head. "Don't tempt me, Nancy. I can't go back. But I think that you should."

She drew away, searching his face with wide blue eyes. "You don't want me any more?"

He laughed wearily. "Of course I do. I need you desperately. But it's a miracle that we've come this far. Our luck can't hold out forever."

"Of course not!" she cried. "That's why I want you to turn back!" She put her hands on his chest. "Claude, won't you give up?"

"No."

Tears trickled down her cheeks. He stood awkwardly, trying to formulate words of comfort. They stuck in his throat. Finally, for want of anything better, he said, "You'd better rest."

"I'll never rest again."

He looked at her questioningly. But she went to the verge of the oasis, leaned against a tree and stood looking across the white desert.

Glystra turned away, paced up and down the cool blue moss.

An hour passed.

He walked down to look at Nancy. She lay out-stretched, head on her arms, asleep. Something in her posture, in the stiff turning-away of the back, intimated to Glystra that never again would their relationship be quite the same.

He went to where Asa Elton lay asleep, touched his shoulder. Elton's eyes flicked open instantly.

"Your watch. Call Steve in an hour."

Elton yawned, rose to his feet. "Right."

A sound. A hoarse, throbbing sound. Glystra was very tired. A harsh yammering penetrated the world behind his eyelids. It was a distant, urgent sound. Danger. He must awake. *He must awake!*

He jumped to his feet, wide awake, clawing at his ionshine.

Elton lay beside him, asleep.

Steve Bishop was nowhere in sight. Neither was Nancy.

A crackle of harsh voices. A thud. Another thud. Further voices, dying out.

Glystra ran through the foliage, through vines with heart-shaped leaves, through a clump of red feather-bushes with green flowers. He tripped on a body, stopped short, frozen in terror.

The body was headless, the head nowhere visible. The body belonged to Steve Bishop.

*Where was that round head, with its brain so full of knowledge? Where was Bishop? Where had he gone?*

He felt a grasp of his arm. "Claude!" He looked into Elton's face.

"They've killed Steve."

"So I see. Where's Nancy?"

"Where's Nancy? *Where's Nancy?*"

He turned to look, then halted his gaze, turned to look at the ground at his feet.

"Whoever killed Steve took her with him," said Elton. "Looks like her tracks, here in the moss—"

Glystra took a deep breath, another. He looked down at the tracks. Sudden energy fired him. He ran off toward the dome. He passed a circle of slim cypresses, branches laden with golden fruit. He came out on a paved walk, leading straight to the great central dome. The whole face of the building was visible as well as the columned arcades to either side. Neither Nancy nor her captors were in sight.

For an instant Glystra stood stock-still, then started forward once again. He ran through the gardens, past a long marble bench, a fountain spraying up six jets of clear water, down a walkway paved with diamond-shaped blocks of white and blue-gray stone.

An old man in a gray wool smock looked up from where he knelt with a trowel by a flower bed.

Glystra stopped, demanded harshly, "Where did they go? The men with the girl?"

The old man gazed blankly at him.

"Where did they go? Answer me, or—"

Elton came up behind. "He's deaf."

Glystra glared, swung away. A door opened into a wall at the end of the walkway; this was the door Nancy must have been taken through. He ran over, tried it. It was as solid as a section of the stone wall.

He pounded on it, yelling, "Open up! Open! Open, I say!"

Elton said, "Pounding on that door won't get you much but a knife in your neck."

Glystra stood back, stared at the stone building. The sunlight had lost its tingle, the gardens were drab and dismal. In a bitter voice, he said, "There's power in this gun to kill a lot of them, and by heaven, I'll see the color of their blood!"

Elton's voice was tinged with impatience. "We'll do better if we go at the matter rationally. First, we'd better take care of our beasts before they're stolen."

Glystra glared defiantly up at the stone wall, then turned away. "Very well . . . You're right. Poor old Bishop."

"We probably won't outlive him more than a day," said Elton in his flat voice.

The zipangotes stood grunting and growling, bumping the white carapace of their heads against the tree trunks. Wordlessly, Glystra and Elton loaded the packs, handling the pathetic belongings of Bishop and Nancy with heavy fingers.

Elton stopped in his work. "If I was running this outfit, do you know what we'd do?"

"What?"

"We'd ride out of here due east as fast as we could make it."

Glystra shook his head. "I can't do it, Asa."

"There's something fishy going on."

"I know it. I've got to make sure what it is. I'm fighting

a lost cause now . . . You can still go back to Kirstendale."

Elton grunted.

They climbed into the saddles, rode toward the dome.

## XVI. *THE SEARCH*

THE AIR was full of lazy sounds: the far bird-like trill, a hum of small insects, the rustle of warm wind. They passed a clump of gardenia trees; here stood a girl playing with a diabolo. She had a triangle face, big dark eyes, she wore green satin trousers and red slippers. Wordlessly she watched them pass, mouth a little parted, her toy forgotten. And contemplating her shining cleanliness, Glystra became warmly aware of his own bristling filth.

They rode out of range of the girl's curious eyes, past a low wall topped with spheres of polished stone overgrown with colored lichen. The wall merged into the side of the main dome; skirting the building they rode down a neat lane. A ditch with clean water flowed to the left, to the right was a line of small shops. It was a bazaar, like hundreds of others Glystra had passed through while traveling among the stars.

Rugs, shawls, and quilts hung over rods; fruits and melons lay heaped in neat pyramids; pottery crocks and vessels lay stacked, their glaze misted by a film of dust; baskets hung from ropes. No one heeded the Earthmen as they rode past on the moaning zipangotes.

One shop, slightly larger than the others, displayed a wooden sword as a guild-mark. Claude Glystra pulled up his mount. "I've got an idea." He slid free a pair of the swords they had taken from the Rebbirs, carried them into the dimness of the shop.

A short fat man, leaning against a heavy table, looked up. He had a big pale head, black hair shingled with gray, a sharp nose and chin, the face of a Rebbir changed and rendered devious by civilization.

Glystra flung the swords down on the table. "What are these worth to you?"

The fat man looked at them and his face changed. He did not try to conceal his interest. "Where did you get these?" He reached out, felt the metal. "These are the finest steel . . . None but the South Rebbir hetmen carry steel like this."

"I'll part with them cheap."

The armorer looked up with quick light in his eye. "What is your wish? A sack of peraldines? A four-tier helmet, mother-of-pearl perhaps, crowned by a Magic Mountain opal?"

"No," said Glystra "It's easier than that. An hour ago my woman was taken into the big dome, or temple, whatever you call it. I want her back."

"Two steel swords for a woman? Do you joke? I'll furnish you fourteen maidens beautiful as the morning sun for the two swords."

"No," said Glystra. "I want this particular woman."

The merchant absent mindedly felt of his neck, stared into the shadow of his shop. "In truth, I covet the swords . . . And yet I own but one head." He picked up one of the swords. "The Dongmen are unpredictable; at times they seem foolish and old, and then one hears of their craft and cruelty, so that an honest man never knows what to believe . . ."

Claude Glystra fidgeted. Time was passing; minutes kneaded dull fingers into his mind. Nancy—his mind wavered sidewise into the possibilities.

He became aware of the merchant's calculation. "Well?"

"Just exactly what do you want of me?"

"I want this woman. She is young and beautiful. I imagine she has been taken to someone's private chamber."

With an expression of surprise at his ignorance, the merchant shook his head. "The sages are celibate. More likely she has been taken to the slave pens."

"I know nothing of the temple. I want the help of someone who does."

The merchant nodded. "I see. You'll risk your own head then?"

"Yes," said Glystra angrily, "but drop the idea that you won't be risking yours along with me."

"*I* won't," said the merchant coolly. "But there is one who will." He pushed with his foot under the counter. A moment later a chunky young man with a face harder and bonier than his father's entered the room. His eyes fell on the swords; he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"My son Nymaster," said the merchant. He turned to the young man. "One of the blades is yours. First you must take this man through Zello's crevice into the temple. Wear robes, take an extra robe with you. This man will point out a woman he wants; no doubt she'll be in the pens. You will bribe Koromutin. Promise him a porphyry dagger. Bring the woman back."

"Is that all? Then the blade is mine?"

"The blade is yours."

Nymaster turned, motioned to Glystra. "Come."

"One moment," said Glystra. He went to the door. "Elton."

Elton slouched into the room, looked around expressionlessly.

Glystra pointed to the two blades. "If I return with Nancy, this man receives the two swords. If neither of us returns—kill him."

The merchant voiced an inarticulate protest. Glystra glared at him. "Do you think I trust you?"

"Trust?" said the merchant with a puzzled expression. "Trust? What word is that?"

Glystra gave Elton a wolfish grin. "If I don't see you again good luck. Set yourself up as an emperor somewhere."

Nymaster beckoned to Glystra; they left the shop, walked around the building and entered an alley between two fences over which fern fronds fell. Nymaster stopped at a little

shed. He pressed heavily on one foot, the door swung open. He reached in, tossed a bundle to Glystra. "Wear this."

It was a white gown with a tall peaked hood. Glystra pulled it over his head. "Now this," said Nymaster a maroon sleeveless smock an inch shorter than the first garment. "And this"-a loose gown of black still shorter, with a second hood.

Nymaster dressed himself similarly. "It's the wear of a Dongman Ordinary—a sage. Once inside the temple, no one will look at us." He tied a third set of robes into a neat bundle, looked up and down the alley. "This way—quickly."

They ran a hundred feet to a portal in the fence, passed through into a rank garden of fern.

Nymaster halted, then stole forward carefully, stopped once more, held out a hand admonishing silence. Looking past him, through a screen of wire vine, Glystra saw a tall, spindly man with a gray face and a crooked nose standing idly in the sunlight. He carried a quirt in a long gnarled hand, which he slapped idly against his black boots. A little distance away six children of varying ages squatted in a truck garden, grubbing weeds with sharp sticks.

Nymaster leaned back, whispered, "To reach the wall we've got to pass Zello. We can't let him see us; he will raise an outcry."

He bent and picked up a clod, flung it hard at the little boy at the end of the line. The boy cried out, then quickly silenced himself, bent furtively to his work.

Zello uncoiled like a lazy python, sauntered yawning across the sunny garden to the boy, raising his whip.

Nymaster pulled at Glystra's arms. "Now . . ."

Glystra let himself be pulled across the patch of open space, behind a wall of crumbling stone.

By a thick cycad with a trunk like the skin of a pineapple he paused, looked in all directions, and finally peered through the fronds at the top of Myrtlesee dome.

"Sometimes a sage stands in the turret watching across the desert. This is when they expect important guests, and wish to prepare the oracle." He peered, squinted. "Hah, there he is, scanning the wide world."

Claude Glystra saw the dark shape in a cage atop the dome, standing stiff as a gargoyle.

"No matter," said Nymaster. "He will never notice us; his gaze is out in the air-layers." He climbed the wall, using chinks and crevices in the rock for foot and hand holds. Halfway up, he disappeared from view, and Glystra, following him up the wall, came upon a narrow gap invisible from below.

Nymaster's voice came from below. "The wall was built for show, and is hollow. There is an avenue within."

Glystra heard a clink, a click and sparks flew through the darkness. A line of hot smolder pulsed as Nymaster blew, burst into a tongue of flame, from which he lit a torch.

Nymaster strode ahead confidently. They walked two hundred yards, across damp well-packed clay. Then the wall ended against blank stone. At their feet was a pit into which Nymaster lowered himself.

"Careful," he muttered. "The footholds are only cut into clay. Get a good grip."

Glystra descended eight feet, ducked under the foundations of a heavy wall, crawled up a slanting passage.

"Now," said Nymaster, "we're under the floor of the Main College. Over there"—he pointed -"is the Veridicarium, where the oracle sits."

Footfalls sounded above—hasty yet light, with an odd hesitancy. Nymaster cocked his head. "That's the custodian, old Caper. When he was young, a slave poisoned her teeth and bit his thigh. The wound never healed and his leg is no thicker than a wand."

A second mass of rock barred their way. Nymaster said, "This is the oracle's pedestal. Now we must be careful. Hold

your head away from the light, say nothing. If we are halted and recognized—"

"What then?"

"It depends on his rank. The most dangerous are the novices in black fringes, who are over zealous, and the Herarchs, with gold baubles on their hoods. The ordinaries are less conscientious."

"What do you plan?"

"This passage leads to the pens where prisoners, slaves and exchanges are pent before processing."

"Processing? Do you mean serving as an oracle?"

Nymaster shook his head. "By no means. The oracle needs the wisdom of four men to guide his thoughts, and for every dissertation of an oracle three men beside himself must be processed. He himself serves as fourth man, for the next oracle."

Glystra, gripped by a sudden impatience, waved his hand. "Let's hurry."

"Now—absolute quiet," warned Nymaster. He led around the rock, up a rude wooden ladder, from which he rolled off onto a shelf. He fixed the torch in a rope socket, and crawled off on his stomach through the darkness. Glystra came after. Overhead a stone floor pressed into his back.

Nymaster stopped, listened, then jerked forward. "Follow me, swiftly."

He disappeared. Glystra almost fell into a dim hole. He swung himself down, stood on a stone floor at Nymaster's back. Vile-smelling water gurgled past his feet. Nymaster strode toward the light, a shaft of feeble yellow shining down a flight of steps. He climbed the steps and, without hesitation, stepped out into the light.

Glystra followed.

The air was hot and reeked with an oily stench that knotted his stomach. From a wide archway came sounds of industry.

By a heroic effort he restrained his gorge. Nymaster im-

patiently hurried off down the corridor.

Men in robes passed—two-three, four—without paying them any heed. Then Nymaster stopped short. "There, behind this wall are the pens. Look in through the chinks and pick out your woman."

Glystra pressed close to the stone wall, peered through an irregular hole at about eye-level. A dozen men and women stood in the middle of the room, or sat limply on stone benches. Their hair had been shaved, and their pates daubed with paint of either blue, green or yellow.

"Well—which one is she?" snapped Nymaster. "That one at the far end?"

"No," said Glystra. "She's not here."

"Ha," muttered Nymaster. "Hm, this poses a problem . . . Very difficult—and I fear past the scope of our agreement."

"Nonsense!" said Glystra. "The agreement was to find the woman and bring her out, whever she was . . . Take me to her, or I'll kill you here and now!"

"I don't know where to look for her," explained Nymaster in a patient voice.

"Find out then!"

Nymaster frowned. "I'll ask Koromutin. Wait here—"

"No. I'll come with you."

Nymaster growled under his breath, and turned off down the passage. He thrust his head into a little chamber. The man within was fat and middle-aged. He wore a spotless white tunic and an immaculate collar of ruffled lace. He was not surprised to see Nymaster and resentful only to the extent that, as an important official, his time was valuable.

Nymaster spoke to him in a low voice, which Glystra bent forward to hear. Koromutin's eyes rested on him, probed under his hood.

"—he says she's not in the pen; he won't leave till he finds her."

Koromutin frowned judiciously. "This woman evidently

must be pent upstairs. If so—well, how much does your father put forward? Now I mind me of a certain dagger of good Ptolemon porphyry . . ."

Nymaster nodded. "It shall be yours."

Koromutin rubbed his hands, bounded to his feet, examined Claude Glystra with a new speculation. "The woman is evidently a rich queen. My dear sir," he bowed, "I salute your loyalty. Allow me to assist your search." He turned, not waiting for Glystra's answer.

They climbed a flight of curving stairs. From above came the sound of footsteps descending. Koromutin bowed with vast obsequiousness.

"Bow!" whispered Nymaster. "The Superior!"

Glystra bowed low. He saw the hem of robes, exceedingly rich. The white was a silky floss; the red, a fur soft as the pelt of a mole; the black, a heavier fur. A peevish voice said, "Where are you, Koromutin? An oraculation will shortly be in progress, and where is the wisdom? You are remiss."

Koromutin spoke resonant apologies. The Superior returned upstairs. Koromutin trotted back to his cubicle, where he donned a high-collared garment of stiff white brocade embroidered with scarlet spiders and a tall white conical hat with ear flaps and cheek guards which almost hid his face.

"Why the delay?" whispered Glystra.

Nymaster shrugged. "Old Koromutin holds the post of Inculcator, and that is his ceremonial regalia. We will be delayed."

"We have no time for it; let's get about our business."

Nymaster shook his head. "Not possible. Koromutin is bound to the oraculation. In any event, I wish to witness the rite; never have I watched an oracle at his revelations."

Glystra growled threats, but Nymaster could not be moved. "Wait till Koromutin leads us to the woman. She is not in the pens; you saw as much yourself."

Glystra was forced to be content.

## XVII. *THE ORACLE*

Koromutin continued his preparations. From a locked cabinet, he brought a jar of a murky yellow fluid, from which he filled a rude hypodermic.

"What's that stuff?"

"That is wisdom." Koromutin spoke with unctuous complacency. "The head glands of four men go into each charge; the material is concentrated sagacity."

*Hormones, pineal fluid,* thought Glystra.

Koromutin replaced the jar of fluid in the cabinet, clamped the hypodermic to the front of his hat. "Now to the Veridicarium."

He led Nymaster and Glystra down the corridor, up the stairs, along a wide passage to the central hall under the dome—a large twelve sided room paneled with mother-of-pearl and swimming with pale gray color. In the center rose a dais of black wood holding a single chair.

There were only two dozen sages in the hall, arranged in a semicircle, chanting monosyllabic gibberish.

"Only a score," muttered Koromutin. "The Lord Voivode will not be pleased. He bases the value of the oracle's wisdom by the number of sages in the hall . . . I must wait here, in the alcove." His voice came muffled as if from under the robes. "My custom, I follow the oracle." He glanced around the hall. "You two had best go by the Boreal Wall, lest some stripling novice peer under your hood and raise an outcry."

Nymaster and Glystra took inconspicuous positions against a great carved screen. A moment later an egg shaped palanquin curtained with peach satin and fringed with blue tassels was borne into the hall. Four black men in red breeches served as porters; two girls followed with a chair of withe and clever pink bladder cushions.

The porters set down the equipage; a red-faced little man hopped out from between the curtains and seated himself in the chair which was hurriedly thrust under him.

He beckoned furiously, to no one in particular, to the world at large. "Haste, haste!" he wheezed. "Life is running out! The light leaves my eyes while I sit here!"

The Superior approached him, bowed his head with nicely calculated respect. "Perhaps the Lord Voivode would care to refresh himself during the preliminary rites."

"Devil take the preliminaries!" bawled the Voivode. "In any event, I note but a niggardly score of sages here to honor my presence; such makeshift preliminaries I can well spare. Let us to the oraculating; this time let him be a stalwart in his prime—a Rebbir, a Bode, a Juillard."

The Superior bowed. "We will seek to oblige you, Voivode." He looked up at a sound. "The oracle comes."

Two sages entered the room supporting between them a black-haired man in a white smock. He stared back and forth like a trapped animal.

The Lord Voivode roared in contempt. "Is this the creature who is to advise me? Faugh! He appears unable to do more than tremble in fear!"

The Superior spoke with imperturbable suavity. "Let your misgivings vanish, Lord Voivode. He speaks with the wisdom of four men."

The wretch in the white smock was hoisted to the chair on the dais, where he sat trembling.

The Lord Voivode watched in ill concealed disgust. "I believe I can tell him more than he can tell me, even with his wisdom quadrupled; all he knows is fear. And once again the precious instants of my life are wasted futilely; where will I find just treatment?"

The Superior shrugged. "The world is wide; perhaps somewhere mightier oracles exist than ours here at Myrtlesee Fountain. The Lord Voivode might with advantage put his questions to one of those other omniscients."

The Voivode spluttered, then abruptly lapsed into silence.

Now appeared Koromutin, stately and ceremonious in his stiff gown. He climbed the dais, lifted the hypodermic down from his hat, plunged it home in the oracle's neck. The oracle tensed, arched his back like a bow, flung his elbows out, thrust his chin hard into the air. For a moment he sat rigid, then slumped, limp as seaweed, into the chair. He put his head into his hands, rubbing his forehead.

There was dead silence in the chamber. The oracle continued to rub his forehead.

His foot jerked. His head bobbed. Sounds came from his mouth. He raised his head in bewilderment. His shoulders quivered, his feet jerked again, his nose twitched. A swift babble poured from his mouth, rising in pitch. He yelled in a hoarse bawling voice. His body quivered, jerked–faster, faster. He was vibrating as if the dais were rocking.

Claude Glystra watched with fascinated eyes. "Is that the wisdom?"

"Quiet."

The man was in agony; his face muscles were knotted into ropes, his eyes glared like lamps.

The Lord Voivode leaned forward, smiling and nodding. He turned to the Superior, who bent respectfully, put a query inaudible over the yammer of the oracle. The Superior nodded calmly, straightened, teetered back and forth on his heels, hands behind his back.

The oracle settled limply into the chair. He sat still, calm and serene, as if agony had purged away all the dross in his soul and left him with a vast meditative coolness.

In the silence the Superior's murmur to the Voivode was clearly distinguishable: "He's now on the settle. You have perhaps five minutes of wisdom before he dies."

The Voivode hitched himself forward. "Oracle, answer well. How long have I to live?"

The oracle smiled wearily. "You ask triviality–and I shall answer. Why not? So–from the position of your body,

from your gait, from certain mental considerations, it is evident that you are eaten by an internal canker. Your breath reeks of decay. I judge your life at a year, no more."

The Voivode turned a contorted face to the Superior. "Take him away; he is a liar! I pay good slaves and then he tells me lies . . ."

The Superior held up a calm hand. "Never come to Myrtlesee Fountain for flattery or bolus, Voivode; you will hear only truth."

The Voivode turned back to the oracle. "How may I extend my life?"

"I have no certain knowledge. A reasonable regimen would include bland foods, abstinence from stimulating narcotics and gland revitalizers, a program of charitable deeds to ease your mind."

The Voivode twisted angrily back to the Superior. "You have gulled me; this creature voids the most odious nonsense. Why does he not reveal the formula?"

"What formula?" inquired the Superior, without concern.

"The mixing of the elixir of eternal life!" roared the Voivode. "What else?"

The Superior shrugged. "Ask him yourself."

The Voivode dictated the question. The oracle listened politely.

"There is no such information in my experience, and insufficient data to synthesize such a formula."

In more gentle tones the Superior suggested, "Ask only such information as lies in the realm of the natural. The oracle is no diviner, like the Witthorns or the Edelweiss Hags."

The Voivide's face turned a mottled purple. "How may I best secure my son his inheritance?"

"In a state isolated from external influence a ruler can rule from tradition, by force or by the desire and acquiescence of his subjects. The last of these guarantees the most stable reign."

"Go on, go on!" screamed the Voivode. "You will die at any moment."

"Strange," said the oracle, with a weary smile, "when now for the first time I have started to live."

"Speak!" said the Superior sharply.

"Your dynasty started with yourself, when you poisoned the previous voivode; there is no tradition of rule. Your son might therefore maintain himself by force. The process is simple. He must kill all who dispute his leadership These acts will win him new enemies, and he must kill these likewise. If he is able to kill faster than his enemies are able to gather their strength, he will remain in power."

"Impossible! My son is a popinjay. I am surrounded by traitors, preening cock-o'-the-walk underlings who wait the time of my death as the signal to rob and pillage."

"In this case your son must prove himself a ruler so able that no one will desire to be rid of him."

The Voivode's eyes grew dim. His gaze went far away, perhaps to the face of his son.

"To foster this situation, you must institute a change in your own policies. Examine every act of your officials from the viewpoint of the least privileged members of the state, and modify your policies accordingly; then when you die, your son will be floated on a reservoir of good will and loyalty."

The Voivode leaned back in his chair, looked quizzically up at the Superior. "And it is for this that I have paid twenty sound slaves and five ounces of copper?"

The Superior was undisturbed. "He has outlined a course of action to guide you. He has answered your questions."

"But," the Voivode protested, "he told me nothing pleasant!"

The Superior looked blandly up along the mother-of-pearl paneling. "At Myrtlesee Fountain you will hear no flattery, no spurious evasions You hear exactitude and truth."

The Voivode swelled, puffed, blew out his cheeks. "Very

well, another question. The Delta-men have been raiding all Cridgin Valley and stealing cattle. My soldiers flounder in the mud and reels. How best may I abate this nuisance? What can I do?"

"Plant bush-vine on the Imsidiption Hills."

The Voivode sputtered; the Superior said hastily, "Explain, if you please."

"The Delta-folk subsist by preference on clams. For centuries they have cultivated clam beds. You have grazed your pechavies on the Imsidiption slopes so steadily that the vegetation is gone and the rain washes great quantities of silt into River Pannasic. This silt is deposited on the clam beds, the clams die. In hunger the Delta-men raid the cattle of the valley. To abate the nuisance, remove the cause."

"They have been impudent and treacherous; I want revenge."

"You will never achieve your wish," the oracle said.

The Voivode leapt to his feet. He seized a stone jar from his palanquin, threw it viciously at the oracle; it struck him on the chest. The Superior held up an outraged hand; the Voivode darted him a look of black malice, flung aside the girls, and jumped into the palanquin. The four black porters silently lifted the poles to their shoulders and started for the door.

The oracle had closed his eyes. He began to gasp—great gulping breaths. His fingers clenched, unclenched. Glystra, watching in fascination, started forward, but Nymaster drew him back.

"Are you mad? Do you not value your head?"

Koromutin marched past, motioned significantly. "Await me in the corridor."

"Hurry!" said Glystra.

Koromutin gave him a glance of wordless contempt and disappeared down the passage. An endless ten minutes later, he returned, wearing his usual white and blue robe. Without a word or glance, he turned up steps glowing with

vermilion lacquer, which gave on an arcade circling the dome. Through tall arches Glystra could see across the oasis, past the shimmer of the desert to the black hills, now hazy in the afternoon light.

Koromutin turned up another flight of stairs, and they came out into another corridor circling the dome. This time the openings overlooked the hall below. Koromutin turned into a small office. A man who was almost his twin sat at a desk. Koromutin waved Nymaster and Glystra back, approached the desk, spoke with great earnestness, and presently received an answer of equal import.

Koromutin beckoned to Nymaster. "This is Jentile, the Steward Ordain. He can help us, if your father will part with a second dagger of workmanship like that I am to receive."

Nymaster grumbled and cursed. "It can be so arranged."

Koromutin nodded and the little man at the desk, as if waiting for the signal, arose and stepped out into the hall.

"He has seen the woman in question," said Koromutin in a confidential undertone, "and can take you to her quarters. I leave you in his care. Walk discreetly, for now you tread in high places."

They continued, with Jentile the steward in the lead—along interminable corridors, up another flight of stairs. Glystra heard a sound which caused him to halt in his tracks—a low-pitched, steady hum.

Jentile turned impatiently. "Come now, I will show you the woman; then my task is done."

"What causes that sound?" asked Glystra.

"Look through the grating; you will see the source. It is a glass and metal organism that talks in distant voices—a thing of potency, but not of our present interest. Come."

Glystra peered through the grating. He saw modern electronic equipment arranged and hooked together in a manner that suggested knowledgeable improvisation. A rough table held a speaker, a microphone, a bank of controls, and behind, the twenty parallel fins which carried the printed

circuits served as condensers, resistances, impedances . . . Claude Glystra stared, the sight opening an entirely new range of possibilities.

"Come, come, come!" barked the steward. "I wish to keep my head on my shoulders, even if you care nothing for yours."

"How much farther?" snapped Nymaster.

"A few steps, no more, then you shall see the woman; but mind you, take care not to make your presence known, or else we'll all dangle and our heads will be drained."

"*What!*" barked Glystra savagely. Nymaster gripped his arm, shook his head urgently. "Don't antagonize the old fool," he whispered. "Otherwise we'll never find her."

## XVIII. *CHARLEY LYSIDDER*

They continued, walking on heavy green carpet along a corridor which constantly curved out of sight ahead. At last Jentile halted at a door of heavy wood. He looked furtively behind him, then stooped with the ease of much practice and peered through the crack where the hinges dented the jamb.

He turned, motioned to Glystra. "Come now, look. Assure yourself of her presence—then we must leave. At any moment the High Dain may appear."

Claude Glystra, smiling grimly, looked through the crack.

Nancy. She sat in a cushioned chair, head back, eyes half-closed. She wore loose pajamas of dull green brocade; her hair was bright and clean, she looked as if she had only just finished scrubbing herself. Her face was blank, expressionless; or rather, she wore an expression Glystra could not identify.

With his left hand Glystra felt for the latch of the door. In his right hand he held his ion-shine. The fat steward

squawked. "Stand back, stand back! Now we must depart!" He plucked Glystra's sleeve with angry fingers.

Glystra shoved him away. "Nymaster, take care of this fool."

The door was not locked. He flung it open, stood square in the doorway.

Nancy looked up with wide eyes. "Claude . . ."

She slowly put her feet to the floor, stood up. She did not rush to him in gladness and relief.

"What's the trouble?" he asked quietly. "What's happened to you?"

"Nothing." Her voice was listless. "I'm all right."

"Let's get moving. There's not too much time."

He put an arm around her shoulders. She seemed limp, dazed.

Nymaster held the steward by the nape of the neck. Glystra looked deep into his frightened and outraged countenance. "Back to the radio room." The steward jerked around, trotted whimpering back along the amber-lit corridor.

Downstairs, back along vaguely remembered ways. Glystra held his ion-shine in one hand, Nancy's arm in the other.

A hum, an electric susurration.

Glystra pushed into the room. A thin man in a blue smock looked up. Glystra said, "Stand up; be quiet and you won't get hurt."

The operator slowly rose to his feet, his eyes on Glystra's ion-shine. He knew it for what it was. Glystra said, "You're an Earthman."

"That's right. What of it?"

"You set up this equipment?"

The operator turned a contemptuous glance along the table. "What there is of it . . . Anything wrong with that? What's your argument?"

"Get me Earth Enclave."

"No, sir. I won't do it. I value my life pretty high,

mister. If you want Earth Enclave, call it yourself. I can't stop you, with that heater on me."

Glystra took a step forward, but the man's face changed not a flicker. "Stand against the wall, next to the steward . . . Nancy!"

"Yes, Claude?"

"Come in here, stand over by the wall, out of the way. Don't move."

She walked slowly to where he had indicated. Her eyes roved around the room, up and down the walls. She licked her lips, started to speak, thought better of it

Glystra sat down at a table and looked over the equipment Power from a small pile a simple shortwave outfit like that owned by a million high-school boys on Earth.

He snapped the "On" switch. "What's the Enclave frequency?"

"No idea."

Glystra opened a file index, flipped to E. "Earth Enclave, Official Monitor Code 181933." The control panel displayed six tuning knobs Under the first was the symbol "0," under the second "10," under the third "100," and so by multiples of ten to the sixth. Evidently, thought Glystra, each knob tuned a decimal place of the frequency. He set the sixth knob to "1," the second to "8"—he looked up, listened

Footsteps sounded along the hall, heavy feet, and Nancy wailed, a wordless sound of desperation.

"*Quiet!*" whispered Glystra. He bent to the dials. "1"—"9"—

The door swung open. A heavy black-browed face looked in. Instantly the steward was on his belly. "Honored Dam, it was never my will, none of my doing . . ."

Mercodion looked over his shoulder into the corridor. "Inside. Seize those men."

Glystra bent to the dials "3"—one more dial to go. Burly men trooped into the room; Nancy staggered out from the wall, her face drawn and bloodless. She stood in the

line of fire. "Nancy!" cried Glystra. "*Get back!*" He aimed his ion-shine. She stood between him and the High Dain. "I'm sorry," whispered Glystra huskily. "It's bigger than your life . . ."

He squeezed the button. Violet light, ghastly on white faces. A sigh. The light flickered, went out. No power.

Three men in black robes rushed him. He fought, wild and savage as any Rebbur. The table tottered, toppled. In spite of the operator's frantic efforts, the equipment crashed to the floor. At this point, Nymaster bolted from the room. His feet pounded down the corridor.

Glystra was fighting from the corner, using elbows, fists, knees. The black-robed men beat him to the floor, kicked his head, wrenched his arms up hard behind his back, punishing him.

"Truss him well," said Mercodion. "Take him down to the pen."

They marched him along the corridors, down the stairs, along the arcade overlooking the oasis.

A black speck streaked low across the sky. Claude Glystra uttered a hoarse cry. "There's an air-car! An Earthman!"

He stopped, tried to pull close to the window. "An Earth air-car!"

"An Earth air-car," said Mercodion easily, "but not from Earth. From Grosgarth."

"Grosgarth?" Glystra's mind worked sluggishly. "Only one man in Grosgarth would own an air-car—"

"Exactly."

"Does the Bajarnum know—"

"The Bajarnum knows you're here. Do you think he owns an air-car and no radio?"

He said to the black-robed men, "Take him to the pens, I must greet Charley Lysidder . . . Watch this one carefully; he's desperate."

Glystra stood in the middle of the stone floor, damp and

miserable. His head was shaved, he had been drenched in an acrid fluid smelling of vinegar.

These were the pens of Myrtlesee Fountain. The air was gruel thick, Glystra breathed through his mouth to escape awareness of the odor. He frowned. Strange. A component of the aroma was a heavy, pungent, almost sweet smell which tickled his memory.

He stood quietly, trying to think. Difficult. The stone floor oozed under his bare feet. Four women crouching beside the wall moaned without pause. Steam poured in from the processing room through chinks and cracks in the stone, bars of yellow light flickering through the stream. With the light and the steam came the sounds of the processing: boiling, pounding, rasping, loud conversation.

Eyes looked in at him, through the hole to the corridor, blinked, passed on . . . Unreality. Why was he here? Eli Pianza was lucky; he lay buried beside the yellow reeds of Lake Pellitante. Roger Fayne was luckier yet. Fayne wore a grotesque puff of purple lace on his head, and played at being both master and servant.

This was the low ebb. Nearly the low ebb. Much of a man's dignity went with his hair. . . . A whiff of the pungent sweet odor came from the processing rooms, stronger than ever. It was definitely familiar. Lemon-verbena? Musk? Hair oil? No. Something clicked in Glystra's mind. *Zygage!* He went to the wall, peered through a chink.

Almost under his face, a cauldron bubbled; to the left a bin held acorn-shaped fruits. Zygage, indeed. He watched in fascination. A man, sweating and pallid, in clammy black leather breeches and a blue neckerchief, scooped up a shovelful of the zygage acorns, sprinkled them into the cauldron.

Zygage! Claude Glystra turned away from the hole, thinking hard. If zygage were a constituent of the oracle serum, why, then, the brain extracts? Probably no reason whatever; probably they were added only for their symbolic potency. Of course he could not be sure—but it seemed un-

likely that pituitary and pineal soup would cause wild contortions like those he had witnessed in the Veridicarium. Much more likely that the zygage was the active ingredient; such would be the parallel with Earth planet-extracts: marijuana, curare, opium, peyote, a dozen others less familiar.

He thought of his own experience with zygage: exhilaration, then hang-over. The oracle's reaction was the same, on a vastly exaggerated scale. Glystra pondered the episode. A miserable terrified wretch had undergone torment and catharsis to achieve a magnificent calm and rationality.

It had been an amazing transformation, baring the optimum personality apparently latent in every human being. How did the drug act? Glystra's mind veered around the question: a problem for the scientists. It seemed to achieve the results of great de-aberration institutes on Earth, possibly by the same essential methods: a churning through the events of a lifetime, the rejection of all subconscious obsessions and irrationality. A pity, thought Glystra, that a man could only achieve this supreme state to die. It was like the hang-over after his smoke-breathing . . . In his brain there was a sudden silence, as if a mental clock had stopped ticking. Steve Bishop had felt no hang over. Bishop had—he recalled Bishop's intensified well-being after the zygage inhalation; apparently his habit of ingesting vitamins had warded off the hang-over.

Vitamins . . . Perhaps the oracle died from exaggerated vitamin depletion. The idea gave Glystra much to think about. He walked slowly back and forth across the damp stone floor.

The woman with the yellow hair watched him dully; the red-eyed man spat.

*"Ssst."*

Glystra looked toward the wall. Hostile eyes gleamed through the hole. He crossed the room, peered out into the corridor.

It was Nymaster. His round face wore an expression of angry discomfort. "Now you lie in the pen," he said in a low, urgent voice. "So now you die. What then for my father? Your man will take away the swords, and possibly kill my father, for so you ordered."

True, thought Glystra. Nymaster had served him faithfully. "Bring me paper," he said. "I will write to Elton."

Nymaster handed through a greasy scrap of paper, a bit of sharp graphite.

Glystra hesitated. "Have you heard anything of—"

"Koromutin says you will be oracle. For Charley Lysidder himself. So the Superior told him while he was beating Koromutin."

Glystra pondered. "Can you bribe me free? I have other metal, other swords like yours."

Nymaster shook his head. "A ton of iron would effect nothing now. Tonight Mercodion has ordained that you burn up your mind for the Bajarnum."

The words sank into Glystra's mind. He stared at Nymaster, scratching his cheek with a ruminative finger. "Can you bring Elton back with you? For another sword of fine steel?"

"Aye," said Nymaster grudgingly. "I can do so . . . A mortal risk—but I can do so."

"Then take him this note, and bring him back with you."

Now the sounds and the odors of the pen had no meaning for him. He paced up and down, whistling thinly through his teeth.

Up and down, up and down, looking across the room at each turn, watching for Elton's face.

A chilly thought struck him. He had guessed something of the mechanics of the plot against him. After Morwatz had failed, after he had eluded the second expedition by crossing the River Oust and dropping the high-line, he had been left to go his own way to Myrtlesec, but all the time, all the

wary miles from Swamp City, he had merely been taking himself to a prearranged trap. The strategy was clear. He had been left to execute it himself. Suppose Elton were part of the machinery? At this moment nothing was unthinkable.

"Glystra."

He looked up, turned to the hole. It was Asa Elton in sage's robes. Glystra crossed the room.

Elton looked in at him quizzically. "How goes it?"

Glystra pressed close to the hole. "Did you bring it?" he asked in a whisper.

Elton passed a little package through the hole. "And now what?"

Glystra smiled thinly. "I don't know, Asa. If I were you, I'd start back down the monoline to Kirstendale. You can't do any more here."

Elton said, "You haven't told me what you plan to do with the vitamins."

"I plan to eat them."

Elton eyed him questioningly. "They been giving you bum chow?"

"No. Just an idea I've got."

Elton glanced up and down the corridor. "With a big hammer I might make a hole in this wall—"

"No. There'd be a hundred sages out here at the first click. You go back to the swordmaker's. Wait there till tomorrow; if I'm not there then, I'm never coming."

Elton said coolly, "There's one or two charges in the ionshine. I've been half-hoping"—his eyes glistened—"to meet someone we know."

Glystra's throat constricted. "I can't believe it," he muttered.

Elton said nothing.

"She never had Bishop killed, I'm sure of it . . . It was an accident. Or he tried to stop her."

"No matter how you look at it—she's part of the picture. Four good men killed—Bishop, Pianza, Darrot, Ketch. I'm

not counting Vallusser; that little rat was in up to his neck. I've been watching her a long time—ever since she insisted on joining our little suicide club."

Glystra laughed shortly. "I thought all the time it was—that she—" He had no words to finish.

Elton nodded. "I know. One thing I'll say for her: She put her life on the line alongside ours. She came out on top. She's up there"—he jerked his thumb—"and you're down here. What a hole. What are they cooking?"

"You saw," said Glystra indifferently. "They distill out some kind of nerve juice which they mix with zygage and feed the oracles. It works on the oracles the way the smoke worked on the Beaujolais soldiers, only a thousand times more."

"And it kills them?"

"Dead as a mackerel."

"Tonight you're the oracle."

Glystra held up the package that Elton had brought. "I've got this. I don't know what's going to happen. From here out, I'm playing strictly by ear. And," he added, "I may be wrong, but I have a hunch there'll be a few unforeseen developments here at Myrtlesee Fountain and I'm not worrying."

Nymaster appeared behind Elton. "Come, there's a prefect on his way down. Come quick."

Glystra pressed close to the hole. "So long, Asa."

Elton waved his hand noncommittally.

## XIX. *WISDOM FOR LYSIDDER*

The sun dropped behind the fronds of Myrtlesee Fountain. A mesh of cirrus clouds flared golden in the sky. Dusk drifted in from eastern lands where night had already fallen over peoples and cities and tribes and castles still unseen.

A marble pavilion extended to the east of Myrtlesee Dome,

enclosed by a colonnade of ornate design. Behind the colonnade was a pond of still water, dimly reflecting the afterglow, with the fronds and ferns of the grove silhouetted in reverse. Four blond and slender youths bearing torches came from the dome. Their hair was cut in bangs. They wore skin-tight costumes sewed of red and green diamonds, black satin slippers with curled toes. They set the torches in tripods of dark wood, returned within.

A moment later six men in black kilts carried forth a square table which they placed in the exact center of the pavilion. The youths brought chairs, and the men in black kilts marched away in a single file.

The young men spread the table with a gold and-brown-striped cloth. At the center, they arranged a miniature landscape—Myrtlesee Fountain in exact detail, complete with dome and pavilion, even to a table on the pavilion where five persons sat to the light of tiny candles.

Flagons of wine were bedded in ice, trays of crystallized fruits, tablets of insect gland-wax, cakes of pressed flower petals were laid exactly in place, then the youths went to stand under the flaming torches.

Minutes passed Dusk gave way to feather-soft Big Planet night. Stars gleamed. A syrup-smooth breeze drifted through the colonnade to flutter the torches.

Voices sounded from the dome. Out on the pavilion came Mercodion, the High Dam of Myrtlesee Fountain and Charley Lysidder, Bajarnum of Beaujolais. Mercodion wore his richest robes, with a stole woven of pearls and metal. The Bajarum wore a gray jacket of heavy soft cloth, red breeches, soft gray boots.

Behind came the Superior and two nobles of the Beaujolais empire.

Lysidder remarked with pleasure at the table, glanced appreciatively at the statue-like youths, seated himself

Wine was poured, food was served. Charley Lysidder was in high spirits and Mercodion extended himself to laugh

graciously at his jovialities. Whenever there was silence, a girl blew chords on a flute. When one of the diners spoke, she stopped instantly.

Ices were brought in glass goblets, and finally pots of fuming incense were placed before each of the diners.

"Now," said the Bajarnum, "now for our oracle, Claude Glystra. Originally I had planned to question him under torture, but the oraculation will prove easier for all concerned. He is a man of wide experience and knowledge; he will have much to impart."

"A pity that such brief opportunity exists to plumb his wisdom."

The Bajarnum shook a finger. "It is a matter you must concern yourself with, Mercodion—the maintenance of longer life in your oracles."

The High Dain bowed his head. "It is as you say . . . And now I will order the oracle prepared and we will go to the auditorium."

The hall was crowded with the rustling, black-gowned sages. By custom, hoods were not worn at night, but the characteristic motivation of reducing individuality to the lowest common denominator was expressed by a white headcloth banded loosely around the forehead, around the nape of the neck, forward under the chin.

Special ceremonial chants had been ordained. Twelve choirs, situated each to a wall, mingled their voices in a twelve-part polyphony.

The Bajarnum, Mercodion and their retinue entered the hall, strolled to benches before the oracle's dais. A serious-faced girl with shining blonde hair appeared at a side door. She wore black silk pantaloons and a gray-green blouse. For a moment she paused in the doorway, then slowly crossed the room, the only woman among hundreds of men, a peacock among crows. Eyes followed her.

She stopped beside the Bajarnum, looked down at him with an oddly searching expression. Mercodion bowed polite-

ly. The Bajarnum smiled, a cold tremble-lipped smile. "Sit down."

The expression of intentness vanished, her face became blank. She sat quietly beside the Bajarnum. A whisper, a buzz, a rustle of garments rose from the spectators. By rumor, the woman was the new servant of the High Dain. Eyes probed his face, but the sallow skin was set like the rind of a pudding and no emotion appeared.

A sad chime sounded, a second tremor ran through the hall, a shifting of stance, a motion of eyes. The Bajarnum suddenly seemed to become aware of the assemblage, he muttered to the High Dain, who nodded and rose to his feet.

"Clear the hall. All must go."

Murmuring, dissatisfied, the sages filed out the great doors. The hall was now nearly empty, and reverberated with echoes of every movement.

A second chime sounded; the oracle appeared. Two prefects stood by his side, the Inculcator in his stiff white gown and tall hat followed close to the rear.

The oracle was wrapped in a robe of gray and red, and white swathing veiled his head. He walked slowly, but without hesitation. At the dais he paused and was lifted to the oracle's seat.

The silence in the hall was like the inside of an ice cave. Not a breath, not a sigh, not a whisper could be heard.

The prefects held the oracle's arms, the Inculcator stepped behind him. He took the hypodermic from his hat, he swung his arm.

The High Dain frowned, squinted, jumped to his feet. "Stop!" His voice was harsh.

The watchers sighed.

"Yes, Dain?"

"Remove the head-swathing; the Bajarnum would look on the man's face."

The prefect hesitated, then reached forward and slowly unhitched the white burnoose.

The oracle looked straight into the eyes of the Bajarnum. He smiled grimly. "If it isn't my old shipmate, Arthur Hidders, dealer in leather."

The Bajarnum made a slight inclination of the head. "More people know me as Charley Lysidder. You appear nervous, Mr. Glystra."

Claude Glystra laughed, rather shakily. Enormous doses of vitamins, amino and nucleic acids were reacting on his motor system like stimulants. "You do me an honor of which I hardly feel myself worthy—"

"We shall see, we shall see," said the Bajarnum all too easily.

Glystra's eyes went to Nancy. She met his eyes a moment, then looked away He frowned. Seen in the new context, beside the man he had known as Arthur Hidders, she took on a new identity one not unfamiliar. "The Sister of Succor," he exclaimed.

Charley Lysidder nodded. "Rather a clever disguise, don't you think?"

"Clever—but why was it necessary?"

The Bajarnum shrugged. "A fur-and-leather dealer might conceivably accumulate enough Earth exchange to make the old-world pilgrimage—but hardly likely that he would bring his talented young secretary with him."

"She's talented all right."

Lysidder turned his head and examined Nancy with dispassionate appreciation. "A pity, really, that she had to become a base tool of policy; she is apt at finer things . . . But that fool Abbigens dropped the ship too far from Grosgarth and I had no one at hand to serve me. Yes, a pity; now she must find another patron." He glanced humorously at Mercodion. "I fancy that she will not need to seek far, eh, Dain?"

Mercodion flushed, darted an angry glance at Lysidder.

"My tastes are perhaps as nice, in some respects, as yours, Bajarnum."

Charley Lysidder settled back in his seat. "It's no matter; I have uses for her in Grosgarth. Let us proceed with the oraculation."

Mercodion waved his hand. "Continue."

The Inculcator raised the hypodermic.

The point stung deep into Glystra's neck. There was a feeling of injection, of pressure.

The prefect's grip tightened on his arms, tensing in anticipation of his motion. He noticed that Nancy had turned her face to the floor; the Bajarnum of Beaujolais, however, watched the proceedings with lively interest.

A great dark hand clamped on Glystra's brain. His body expanded enormously; his arms felt twenty feet long, his feet were at the bottom of a cliff; his eyes were like two long pipes leading out on the world. The Bajarnum's voice came like a sibilant whisper in a vast cave.

"Ah, now he squirms. Now it takes on him"

The prefects held Glystra with practiced ease.

"Look!" exclaimed the Bajarnum delightedly. "Look how he flails about . . . Ah, he has caused me much trouble, that one. Now he pays the price."

But Claude Glystra felt no pain. He had passed beyond mere sensation. He was re-living his life, from earliest foetus up through the years, re-living, re-experiencing, re-knowing every detail of his existence. Reviewing these events was a great superconsciousness, like an inspector watching a belt of fruit. As each distorted concept, misunderstanding, fallacy appeared, the hand of the inspector reached down, twitched events into rational perspectives, smoothed out the neural snarls which had clogged Glystra's brain.

Childhood flickered past the super-awareness, then early life on Earth, his training among the planets of the System. Big Planet bulked outside the spaceship port, again he crashed on the Great Slope by Jubilith; again he set out

on the long journey to the east. He retraced his route through Tsalombai Woods, Nomadland, past Edelweiss, the River Oust, Swamp Island, down the monoline through the Hibernian March, Kirstendale, across the desert toward Myrtlesee Fountain. Present time loomed ahead; he plunged through like a train coming out of a tunnel. He was once more aware and conscious, with the whole of his life rearranged, all his knowledge ordered into compartments, ready for instant use.

The High Dain's voice came to his ears. "You see him with his brain purged and clear. Now you must hasten; in a few minutes his life-force dwindles and he dies."

Claude Glystra opened his eyes. His body was at once warm and cool, tingling with sensitivity. He felt strong as a leopard, agile, flooded with potential.

He looked around the hall, studying the troubled faces of the people before him. Victims they were, the result of their inner warps. Nancy was pale as eggshell, her eyes full and moist. He saw her as she was, divined her motives.

The Bajarnum said doubtfully, "He looks perfectly happy."

Mercodion answered, "That's the common response. For a brief period they float on a sea of well-being. Then their vitality fails and they go. Hurry, Bajarnum; hurry, if you wish knowledge."

Charley Lysidder spoke in a loud voice. "How can I buy weapons from the System Arms Control? Who can I bribe?"

Glystra looked down at the Bajarnum, at Mercodion, at Nancy. The situation seemed suddenly one vast humor; he found it hard to control his face.

The Bajarnum repeated the question, more urgently.

"Try Alan Marklow," said Glystra, as if imparting a precious secret.

The Bajarnum leaned forward, excited in spite of himself. "Alan Marklow? The chairman of the Control?" He sat back, a pink flush, half-anger, half-anticipation, on his face.

"So Alan Marklow can be bought the sanctimonious scoundrel."

"To the same extent as any other member of the Control," said Glystra. "That is the reasoning behind my advice: if you plan to bribe any of them, the best person to subvert is the man at the top."

The Bajarnum stared. The High Dain's eyes narrowed. He jerked upright on his seat.

Glystra said, "As I understand it, you want weapons so that you may extend your empire; am I right?"

"In essence," the Bajarnum admitted warily.

"What is the motive behind this desire?"

Mercodion raised his head, started to bellow an order, thought better of it, clamped his mouth in a tight white line.

The Bajarnum reflected. "I wish to add glory to my name, to make Grosgarth the queen city of the world, to punish my enemies."

"Ridiculous. Futile."

Lysidder was nonplused. He turned to Mercodion. "Is this a usual manifestation?"

"By no means," snapped Mercodion. He could contain his fury no longer. He leapt to his feet, black brows bristling. "Answer the questions directly! What kind of oracle are you, evading and arguing and asserting the ego which you must know has been numbed by the drug of wisdom? I command you, act with greater pliability, for you will die in two minutes and the Bajarnum has much he wants to learn."

"Perhaps my question was inexact," said the Bajarnum mildly. He returned to Glystra. "What is the most practical method for me to acquire metal weapons at a low cost?"

"Join the Patrol," said Glystra waggishly. "They'll issue you a sheath-knife and an ion-shine free."

Mercodion exhaled a deep breath. The Bajarnum frowned. The interview was not going at all as he had expected. He

tried a third time. "Is it likely that Earth-Central will forcibly federate Big Planet?"

"Highly unlikely," said Glystra, with complete honesty. He thought it was almost time to die, and sank limply into the chair.

"Most unsatisfactory," grumbled Mercodion.

Charley Lysidder chewed his lip, surveying Glystra with his deceptively candid eyes. Nancy stared numbly; for all his sharpened perceptions, Glystra could not fathom her thoughts.

"One more question," said the Bajarnum. "How can I best prolong my life?"

Only by the sternest measures could Glystra control his features. He responded in a weak and doleful voice, "Allow the Inculcator to shoot you full of wisdom-stuff, as he has me."

"Faugh!" spat Mercodion. "The creature is insufferable! Were he not three-quarters dead, I swear I would run him through . . . Indeed –"

But Claude Glystra had slumped to the dais.

"Drag the hulk to the 'toir-room," roared Mercodion. He turned to Lysidder. "A miserable mistake, Bajarnum. If you wish, a second oracle will be prepared."

"No," said the Bajarnum, thoughtfully surveying Glystra's body. "I wonder only what was his meaning."

"Aberrated mish-mash," scoffed Mercodion.

They watched the prefects take the body from the hall.

"Strange," said Charley Lysidder. "He seemed completely vital a man very far from death . . . I wonder what he meant . . ."

A man stole through the night, trailing the odor of death. He came through Zello's garden plot, ducked into the alley, quietly approached the street.

No one was in sight or earshot. He trotted quietly through the shadows to the house of the swordsmith.

Light glowed yellow through the shutters. He knocked.

Nymaster opened the door. He stood stock-still, his eyes bulging. A second man came to look suspiciously over his shoulder—Elton, who stared a breathless moment. "Claude," he said huskily, "you're—you're—" His voice broke.

Glystra said briskly, "We've got to hurry. First a bath."

Elton nodded wryly. "You need something of the sort." He turned to Nymaster. "Fill a tub. Get some clothes."

Nymaster turned away wordlessly.

"They hauled me to their abbatoir," said Glystra. "When the keeper came, I jumped out at him, and he went into a fit. I escaped through the wall."

"Did they pump you full of nerve-juice?"

Glystra nodded. "It's quite an experience." During his bath he gave Elton and Nymaster an account of his experiences as an oracle.

"And now what?" Elton asked.

"Now," said Glystra, "we do Lysidder one in the eye."

Half an hour later, slipping through the gardens, they looked out on the marble courtyard where the Bajarnum's air-car rested. A man in a scarlet tunic and black boots lounged against the hood. An ion-shine hung at his waist.

"What do you think?" whispered Glystra.

"If we can get in it, I can fly it," said Elton.

"Good. I'll run around behind him. You attract his attention." He disappeared.

Elton waited two minutes, then stepped out into the courtyard, leveled his ion shine. "Don't move," he said.

The guard straightened, blinked angrily. "What's the—" Glystra appeared behind him. There was a dull sound; the guard sagged. Glystra took his weapon, waved to Elton. "Let's go."

Myrtlesee Fountain dwindled below them. Glystra laughed exultantly. "We're free, Asa—we've done it."

Elton looked out across the vast dark expanse. "I won't believe it until I see Earth Enclave below us."

Glystra looked at him in surprise. "Earth Enclave?"

Elton said tartly, "Do you propose to fly to Grosgarth?"

"No. But think. We're in a beautiful position. Charley Lysidder is marooned at Myrtlesee Fountain—without his air-car, without his radio to call for another, if he owns one."

"There's always the monoline," said Elton. "That's fast enough. He can be back in Grosgarth in four days."

"The monoline exactly. He'll use the monoline. That's where we'll have him."

"Maybe easier said than done. He won't venture out unless he goes armed to the teeth."

"I don't doubt it. He might conceivably send someone else back to Grosgarth, but only if he owns another air car. We'll have to make sure. There's a spot, as I recall, where the monoline passes under a bluff, which should suit us very well."

Elton shrugged. "I don't like to play a string of luck too far—"

"We don't need luck now. We're not the poor hag-ridden fugitives that we were; we know what we're doing. Before, the Bajarnum was hunting us; now we're hunting him. Right down there—" Glystra pointed. "That bald-headed bluff. We'll settle on top and wait out the night. Early tomorrow if he's coming at all we should see Charley Lysidder scudding west under full press of sail. He'll want to get back to Grosgarth as soon as possible."

## XX. *VACANCY IN BEAUJOLAIS*

Some two hours after dawn a white speck of sail came drifting across the desert from the green smudge that was Myrtlesee Fountain.

"Here comes the Bajarnum," said Glystra, with evident satisfaction.

The trolley drew closer, swinging and swaying with the changing force of the wind. It was a long freight carrier,

equipped with two long lateen booms, and flew down the line gracefully as a white swan.

With a hum and spin of great wheels, the contrivance of wood and canvas slid under them, whirled on into the west. Four men and one woman rode the platform: Charley Lysidder, three Beaujolain nobles in scarlet tunics, elaborate black felt hats and black boots—and Nancy.

Claude Glystra looked after the diminishing freight carrier. "None of them wore pleasant expressions."

"But they all wore ion-shines," Elton pointed out. "It'll be a risky business going near them."

"I don't intend to go near them." Glystra rose to his feet and started back toward the air-car.

Elton said with mild testiness, "I don't mind chasing after you if I know what you've got on your mind; but if you ask me, you're carrying this superman business a little too far."

Glystra stopped short. "Do I really give that impression?" He looked reflectively across the sandy wastes toward the green paradise of Myrtlesee. "Perhaps it's the normal state of the psyche after such a traumatic shock."

"What's the normal state?"

"Introversion. Egocentricity." He sighed. "I'll try to adjust myself."

"Maybe I'll take a dose of that poison, too."

"I've been thinking along the same lines. But now—let's catch Lysidder." He slid into the air-car.

They flew west, over the tortured hills of obsidian, the mounds of white sand, the rock flat, over the verge of the great cliff. They slanted down, skimmed low over the tumble of rock and scrub, already shimmering in the morning heat.

The monoline rising to the lip of the cliff etched a vast flat curve, a spiderweb against the sky. Glystra veered west, flew a mile past the bottom platform, landed under one of the stanchions. "Here we violate the first of Osrik's commandments: we cut the line. In fact, we excise a hundred

feet—the length between two of the stanchions should be enough."

He climbed one pole, slashed the line; Elton did the same at the second.

"Now," said Glystra, "we double the line, tie the light to the underframe."

"Here's a swingle-bar; that suit you?"

"Fine. Two round turns and a couple half hitches should do the trick." He watched while Elton made the line fast. "And now we go back to the bottom anchor."

They returned to the platform from which the monoline rose to the lip of the cliff. Glystra landed the air-car in the shadow of the platform, jumped to the landing. "Pass up one of those ends from under the boat."

Elton pulled one of the trailing lengths clear, tossed it up.

"Now," said Glystra, "we make fast to the monoline with a couple of rolling hitches."

"Ah," said Elton. "I begin to catch on. The Bajarnum won't like it."

"The Bajarnum is not being consulted . . . You get into the car, in case the weight of the monoline starts to drag . . . Ready?"

"Ready."

Glystra cut the monoline at a point four feet past the first of his hitches. The line sang apart, the connection to the air-car took hold, and a long wave swerved up the line and out of sight. The air-car now served as the bottom anchor to the monoline.

Glystra joined Elton. "I give them about an hour. A little less, if the wind is good."

Time passed. Phaedra shouldered huge and dazzling into the dark blue Big Planet sky. Off in the brush a few albino savages lurked and peered. Insects like eels with a dozen dragonfly wings slid easily through the air, threading the harsh gray branches. Round pink toads with eyes on anten-

nae hopped among the rocks. At the top of the cliff appeared a spot of white.

"Here they come," said Elton.

Glystra nodded. "The ride of their life coming up."

The white spot at the top of the cliff dipped over the edge, started down the long curve. Glystra chuckled. "I'd like to watch the Bajarnum's face."

He pushed down the power-arm. The car lifted from behind the platform, climbed into the air—up, up, as high as the lip of the cliff. The trolley rolled down into the lowest section of the loop, slowed, hung suspended, helpless. Five black dots were the passengers—agitated, outraged, uncertain.

Glystra flew above the trolley to the monoline landing at the top of the cliff, and settled on the platform. The second length of line under the air-car he made fast to that section of the monoline which led over the cliff. He cut it, and now the trolley with its five occupants hung entirely suspended from the air-car.

Glystra peered over the brink. "There he is, the Bajarnum of Beaujolais, trapped fair and square, and not a hand laid on him."

"They've still got their guns," said Elton. "No matter where we set 'em down, they still can shoot at us—even if we take them as far as the Enclave."

"I've considered that. Dousing them in a lake will cool Charley Lysidder's temper as well as short out his ion-shines."

The Bajarnum's face, as he stood dripping on the sand beach, was pinched and white. His eyes gluted like puddles of hot quicksilver; he looked neither to the left nor right. His three noble companions somehow contrived to maintain their dignity even while water sucked squashily in their boots. Nancy's hair clung dankly to her cheeks. Her face was blank as a marble mask. She sat shivering, teeth chattering audibly.

Glystra tossed her his cloak. Draping it over her shoulders and turning away, she slipped out of her sodden garments.

Claude Glystra stood holding the ion-shine. "Now one at a time into the car. Elton will search you for knives and hooks and like unpleasantnesses on the way." He nodded to the Bajarnum. "You first."

One by one, they passed Elton, who extracted three daggers, the sodden ion-shines, and a deadly little poison slapsack from the group.

"Back in the car, gentlemen," said Glystra, "as far back as possible."

The Bajarnum said in a voice soft as the hiss of silk on silk, "There shall be requiting, if I must live two hundred years to see it."

Glystra laughed "Now you spit nonsense, like an angry cat. Any requiting to be done will be for the hundred thousand men, women, and children you've sold into space."

The Bajarnum blinked "There has been no such number."

"Well—no matter. A hundred or a hundred thousand—the crime is the same."

Glystra climbed up into the seat beside Elton, sat looking down into the five faces. Lysidder's emotions were clear enough: serpent-spite and fury behind the mask of the small features in the too-big head. The three noblemen were uniformly glum and apprehensive. And Nancy? Her face was rapt, her thoughts clearly far away. But Claude Glystra saw neither fear, anger, nor doubt. Her brow was clear, the line of her mouth was natural, almost happy; her eyes flickered with the passage of her thoughts like the flash of silver fish in dark water.

*Here*, thought Glystra in sudden insight, *is the conflict of multiple personalities resolved; she has been at war with herself; she has been caught in a flow too strong to resist; she submits with relief. She feels guilt; she knows she will be punished; she awaits punishment with joy.*

They were all settled. He turned to Elton. "Let's go. Think you can find the Enclave?"

"Hope so." He rapped his knuckles on a black cabinet. "We can find our way along the radio beam after we get around the planet."

"Good."

The air-car rose into the air and flew west. The lake vanished astern.

Lysidder wrung water from the hem of his cloak. He had recovered something of his suavity and spoke in a thoughtful voice. "I think you wrong me, Claude Glystra. So indeed I have sold starving waifs, but as a means to an end. Admittedly the means was uncomfortable, but did not people die before Earth became federated?"

"Then your ambition is to federate Big Planet?"

"Exactly."

"To what purpose?"

The Bajarnum stared. "Why—would not there then be peace and order?"

"No, of course not—as you must know very well. Big Planet could never be unified by conquest—certainly not by the Beaujolain army mounted on zipangotes, and not in your lifetime. I doubt if you care for peace and order. You have used your army to invade and occupy Wale and Glavthree, both quiet farm-countries, but the gypsies and the Rebbirs roam, ravage, murder at will."

Nancy turned and eyed the Bajarnum dubiously. Charley Lysidder preened a ring in his mustache.

"No," said Glystra, "your conquests are motivated by vanity and egotism. You are merely Atman the Scourge in better-looking clothes."

"Talk, talk, talk," sneered Lysidder. "Earth commissions come and go; Big Planet swallows them all. They drown like gnats in Batzimarjian Ocean."

Glystra grinned. "*This* commission is different—what's left

of it. I insisted on complete power before I took the job. I do not recommend; I command."

The Bajarnum's tight features squeezed even closer together, as if he were tasting something bitter. "Assuming all this were true—what would you do?"

Glystra shrugged. "I don't know. I have ideas, but no program. One thing is certain: the slaughter and the slaving must stop."

"Hah!" The Bajarnum laughed spitefully. "So you'll call down Earth warboats, kill the gypsies, the Rebbirs, the nomads, the steppe-men, all the wandering tribes across Big Planet—you'll build an Earth Empire where I would build a Beaujolain Realm."

"No," said Glystra. "Clearly you do not grasp the crux of the problem. Unity can never be imposed on the people of Big Planet, any more than a state could be formed from a population of ants, cats, fish, monkeys, elephants. A thousand years may pass before Big Planet knows a single government. An Earth dominated Big Planet would be unwieldy, expensive, arbitrary—almost as bad as a Beaujolain Empire."

"Then what do you plan?"

Glystra shrugged. "Regional organization, small regional guard-corps . . ."

The Bajarnum sniffed. "The whole decrepit paraphernalia of Earth In five years your regional judges are soliciting bribes, your regional policy-makers are enforcing uniformity on the disparate communities."

"That indeed," said Claude Glystra, "is where we must tread warily. . . ."

He looked out the window across the sun-drenched Big Planet landscape. An endless vista, forested mountains, green valleys, winding rivers, hot plains.

He heard a muffled cry, and twisted to find two of the men in red tunics on their feet, crouching to leap. He

twitched the ion-shine; the men in the damp red tunics sank back.

Lysidder hissed a word Glystra could not hear; Nancy shrank to the side of the boat.

Ten minutes of acrid silence. Finally the Bajarnum said in a crackling, self-conscious voice, "And, may I ask, what you plan with us?"

Glystra looked out the window again "I'll tell you in another couple of hours."

They flew across an island-dappled sea, a gray desert, a range of mountains with white peaks reaching angrily up into dark blue sky. Over a rolling country dotted with vineyards. Glystra said, "This is far enough, I think. We'll set down here, Asa."

The air-car touched ground.

Charley Lysidder hung back, his delicate features working. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I'm turning you loose. You're on your own. You can try to get back to Grosgarth if you like. I doubt if you'll make it. If you stay here, you'll probably have to work for a living—the worst punishment I could devise."

Lysidder and the three noblemen sullenly stepped out into the afternoon sunlight. Nancy hung back. Lysidder gestured angrily. "I have much to say to you."

Nancy looked desperately at Glystra. "Won't you let me out elsewhere? . . ."

Glystra shut the door. "Take 'er up, Asa." He turned to Nancy. "I'm not setting you down anywhere," he said shortly.

Charley Lysidder and his three companions became minute shapes, manikins in rich-colored clothes; rigid, motionless, they watched the air-car swing across the sky. Lysidder raised his fist, shook it in a frenzy of hate. Glystra turned away, grinning "Now there's no more Bajarnum of Beaujolais. Vacancy, Elton. Do you need a job?"

"I believe I'd make a medium-to good king . . . Come

to think of it," Elton ruminated, "I've always wanted a nice little feudal domain in a good wine country . . ." His voice trailed off. "Anyway, put my name down for the job."

"It's yours, if I've got anything to say about it—and I have."

"Thanks. My first official act will be to clean out that den of fakers, Myrtlesee Fountain. Or does my empire run that far?"

"If you want Myrtlesee Fountain, you've got to take the Palari Desert and the Rebbirs along with it."

"Draw the boundary along the River Oust," said Elton. "I know when I'm well off."

Big Planet landscape, swimming in the halcyon light of late afternoon, slipped astern. Claude Glystra finally found it impossible to ignore the quiet figure in the rear of the car. He stepped down from the control platform, settled upon the seat beside her. "As far as I'm concerned," he said gruffly, "I'm willing to believe that you were an unwilling accessory, and I'll see that—"

She interrupted him in a low and passionate voice. "I'll never be able to make you believe that we were working for the same things."

Glystra grinned a wry, sad smile, remembering the journey east out of Jubilith. Darrot, Ketch, Pranza, Bishop, all dead; and if not by her direct action at least with her connivance.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, "but let me speak—and then you may drop me anywhere, in the middle of the ocean if you like.

"The gypsies burned my home with all inside," she added in a dull voice. "I told you so; it is true. I wandered to Grosgarth; Charley Lysidder saw me at the Midsummer Festival. He was crying crusade against all the outside world, and here, so I thought, was how Big Planet might be made safe, and evil beings like the gypsies exterminated. He called me to his service. I did not refuse. What girl refuses an emperor? He took me to Earth; on the way back, we

learned of your plans. Apparently you projected nothing more than the persecution of Charley Lysidder. I was bitter against Earth and all its people. They lived in wealth and security, while on Big Planet the great-grandchildren of Earth were murdered and tormented. Why could they not help us?"

Glystra started to speak; she made a weary gesture. "I know what you will say 'Earth can only wield authority over a finite volume of space. Anyone who passes through the boundaries forfeits the protection of those within.' That might have been valid for the first ones to come out from Earth, but it seems cruel to punish the children of these thoughtless ones forever and ever . . . And it seemed that while you would do nothing to help us, you wanted to thwart the only man on Big Planet with vision and power: Charley Lysidder. And much as it hurt me, because"—she darted him a brief look—"I had come to love you, I had to fight you."

"Why didn't you?" asked Glystra.

She shuddered. "I couldn't. And I've lived in misery . . . I can't understand how you failed to suspect me."

"When I think back," said Glystra, his eyes on the past, "it seems as if I knew all the time, but could not make myself believe it There were a hundred indications Morwatz' troopers had us bound and helpless, you refused to cut us loose until it was clear that the Beaujolains were dead and the gypsies were coming You thought the Fountain insects sounded like birds. There are no birds on Big Planet. And when Bishop was killed—"

"I had nothing to do with that. I tried to slip off to the dome He came after me and the sages killed him and took his head."

"And Pianza?"

She shook her head. "The traders had already killed Pianza. I kept them from killing everyone else. But I let them take the trolleys, because I thought that if you would only return to Kirstendale we could live together safe and

happy . . ." She looked at him and her mouth drooped. "You don't believe anything of what I'm saying."

"No, on the contrary, I believe everything . . . I wish I had your courage."

Elton's voice came raucously down from the control platform. "You two are beginning to embarrass me. Clinch and get it over with."

Glystra and Nancy sat in silence. After a moment, Glystra said, "There's a lot of unfinished business behind us . . . On our way back we'll drop in at Kirstendale and hire Sir Roger Fayne to pull us around the streets in a big carriage."

"Count me in," said Elton. "I'll bring a long whip."

**JACK VANCE**

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